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WP 4/2006

MPP Working Paper No. 4/2006 ©
March 2006
ISBN: 87-91839-16-5
ISSN: 1396-2817

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**British Academy of Management Annual Conference, Oxford
13.-15. September 2005**

Developmental paper

Title:

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Track:

Management Consultancy

Mutual construction and reconstruction in client-consultant interaction

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Based on preliminary interviews with client representatives and a pilot case study, the paper explores collaboration and mutual construction in client-consultant relationships. Both consultants and client actors take part in an active construction and reconstruction of knowledge that involve struggles over position, power and control. In the context of client-consultant interaction, it is thus not only ideas and solutions that are contested but also the power to define. Attention is paid to how ideas are brought into play and negotiated in the interaction between actors. The empirical material presented in the paper illustrates how consultancy projects evolve through processes of negotiation over whose interpretation should count and who should be in control. In the process, client actors with different positions and interests play an active role in creating what become valid and what ideas are appropriated.

Introduction

This paper brings into play the first findings and ideas of an empirically based PhD project on the client-consultant relationship in a Danish context. The project commenced November 2004 and is thus in its early stages. The PhD project aims to contribute to empirical research on the everyday practice of client-consultant interaction. The present paper focuses on close collaboration and mutual construction of the consultancy project. A central theme in interviews with client representatives of projects that were nominated for the Danish Management Association (DMR) award 2005, was the idea of close collaboration as a path to successful consultancy projects. Close collaboration was emphasized as a critical factor for success and the clients talked of strong partnerships and relationships characterised by mutual respect, trust and open dialogue. There was a constant reference to a 'we' - client actor(s) and consultants - and the projects were generally described as joint compositions. As one manager said, it was difficult to "decompose" who did what, who came with what ideas and how it ended up were it did.

In an English context case studies of award-winning projects point in the same direction (Czerniawska & May 2004). As clients described the most successful projects, 'together' was the most frequent word used (21). Czerniawska and May summarise the key lesson of the award-winning projects as partnership and collective effort - 'the power of working together' as it was expressed by a client (6). In an American context, Carucci and Tetenbaum (2000) interviewed managers in a wide variety of organisations about consulting engage-

ments and here it was similarly the close working relationship that was identified as a key factor for creating value.

There is thus an increasing tendency to emphasise the importance of collaboration, close relations and partnership. The idea of the detached expert consultant is being left behind and as it has long been argued in the context of process consulting, relationship building and working together is crucial for ensuring client ownership of problems and solutions (Schein 1999). The Management Consultancies Association in the UK (MCA) explicitly states that "the most effective consultancy projects are those in which client and consultant work as members of a team, each bringing their own knowledge, expertise and resources to bear in realising an opportunity or resolving a problem" (MCA website).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the dynamics of close collaboration and mutual construction of the consultancy project might evolve in practice. As Czerniawska (1999) points out, the shift from consultants as detached 'advisers' to involved 'doers' raises new issues for both consultants and clients. It is thus important to increase our understanding of the implications 'the power of working together' might have in practice. The empirical material presented in this paper indicates that close collaboration is unlikely to be as straightforward as the narratives of success seem to imply. Attention is paid to how ideas are brought into play and negotiated through processes that in different ways involve positioning, power and control.

Researching a relational practice

The present PhD project is situated within an approach to the study of management consultancy that foregrounds its mutual and dialectic aspects. Fundamentally, management consultancy is a relational practice; it comes into being and is accomplished only in relation to a client. Consultants sell an intangible product; a service that is produced as it is delivered in interaction with a client (Clark 1995). In the literature, the client-consultant relationship is therefore treated as a central aspect of management consultancy (Werr & Styhre 2003; Katay & Wright 2003). Johansson (2004) argues that co-construction is a fundamental feature of the consultancy process that is seen as a co-operative effort between the consultant and the client. Sturdy (1997) further states that a central feature of consultancy as an interactive and dialectical process, is the need to secure identity and control in the relationship that both consultants and clients have.

From this, it follows that the nature of the client-consultant relationship is open-ended and evolving. As Fincham (1999) argues, it is important not to depict the relation as a set of fixed dependencies. Werr and Styhre (2003) similarly argue for 'deessentializing' the client-consultant relationship. There are no predefined or natural client-consultant roles and no unambiguous power distribution between the two parties (Werr and Styhre 2003). Taking the full consequence of this view means that in the social space that clients and consultants create, everything can potentially be negotiated within the constraints of formal positions, power relations and specific situations. Consequently, we cannot assume that it is self-evident what it means to belong to the category of either consultant or client, how the power dynamic develops and who can be seen as 'insider' or 'outsider' at any point of time. That is the empirical question.

This applies also to the content of consulting services. Client-consultant interaction will always revolve around something; a task to be accomplished, a change to be implemented, a problem to be solved etc. And management consultants will probably in most cases deploy knowledge of one kind or another in the consultancy project. Knowledge is understood here as the ideas, conceptions and perceptions that have survived in the struggle with other ideas (Hastrup 1992). Thus, 'knowledge' can not be taken for granted. The central issue is how ideas of various kinds are brought into play and negotiated in the interaction between actors and how ideas and versions of reality are created and made to count. Both consultants and clients take part in this active construction and reconstruction of knowledge. A construction of 'what we know' as the pilot case study will show.

Such knowledge construction is socially situated in specific contexts where negotiations over power and control is a decisive factor in the creation of meaning. As Hastrup argues, the struggle over ideas is far from always taking place on equal terms (1992: 9). The power to define and represent reality is crucial in all knowledge construction. In interaction with others, we have to continuously negotiate our position in social space and whose definition of the situation is to count.

The PhD project aims to contribute to further empirical exploration of these themes. The research is designed as a qualitative, exploratory and actor-oriented study with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of client-consultant interaction embedded in specific organizational contexts. The client-consultant relationship as it unfolds in practice on change projects is explored through in-depth field studies. The research design is inspired by an anthropological approach concerned with how people act and react in everyday situations and the meanings they attach to what they experience. The aim is to follow projects through their entire life-cycle using participant observation to explore how the consulting service is created and negotiated in concrete situations. In-depth interviews is used to explore how central actors in the case projects experience and interpret situations, negotiations and actions.

This paper is based on initial empirical work, namely interviews with clients of projects nominated for the Danish management awards and a pilot case study. Client managers of seven nominated cases were interviewed. One of these cases was explored further through additional interviews with the commissioning manager and four senior managers that had been involved in the project. The pilot case study was carried out using participant observation throughout the course of a consulting assignment where a management consultancy was hired to evaluate and optimise the process quality of a government project across several Danish ministries. Interviews were carried out with the consultant and the client project manager. All interviews were conducted in Danish.

Stories of success

To begin the exploration of the idea of close collaboration, I will take a closer look at two of the Danish nominated projects as they were described in interviews with client managers. As the stories of success were told and the collaboration was praised, 'close collaboration' also revealed itself as a less simple and straightforward road to successful consulting projects than indicated at first sight.

An IT-directors rise to glory

The first project was nominated because of its extraordinary success in turning around an IT-department that had a history of either failed or misplaced projects. Client and consultants developed a new project methodology for the development and management of IT-projects and created strategic integration of the IT-department with the business side. As the client described it, the consultants provided knowledge and experience of project management as well as a solid understanding of business. The consultants took part in both development and implementation of the solutions that emerged from the process itself, but they also played a decisive role in the tactical power game involved in the integration and strategic positioning of the IT-department. As the client put it, the consultants became his "right hand" and without them he would have walked.

The consultants became part of the power struggle in the organization as loyal partners of a particular client actor. The IT-director described the project as a "journey" and a "mission" where he shared the trials and tribulations with his consultants. It was a feeling of "we are in this together" as he put it. As the story was told, it was tempting to give way to associations of epic stories of 'One for All, All for One'. The process was highly political and the result of 'the mission' was clearly to the advantage of this particular manager in creating a strong power base for himself in the organization. The case was an example of a project where the consultants became 'insiders' in the process. A particular client actor and the consultants he had hired created an 'us' that seemed extraordinarily strong and in the process, other client actors were constructed as 'them'.

Accelerating and restructuring

The second case was explored through interviews with the top-management group as mentioned above. The context of the project was a major turn-around where consultants were hired to develop the management skills and mind-sets of the senior management group to help them accelerate and add more value. The CEO described the relationship with the consultants as exceptionally good and praised their personal involvement throughout the process - "they are part of us". Two interviews were conducted with this CEO and it was interesting to note that the story changed in some respects during the second interview. Talking about concrete situations provided hints to processes of negotiation that had taken place. Negotiations over what, how and how much should be changed. But the negotiations did not only concern the form and content of the project, but also the degree of closeness, control and power in the relationship. As it turned out, 'they are part of us' was not as simple as the statement seems to suggest.

The CEO described how he turned down a particular suggestion made by the consultant, because he interpreted it as a way of trying to get closer - "he wants to be more part of the organization". What the consultant's suggestion might or might not have added, or whether it had any validity, did not seem to be the main consideration. Negotiations over positioning and control played a part. Consultants could potentially become trusted 'right hands' and close companions, but getting close was not without ambiguities, as it was similarly evident in interviews with clients of other nominated projects not explored in this paper. In most

cases it was important for the clients to keep the consultants 'in their place' to use Jenkins' wording (2000: 15). Werr and Styhre (2003) interviewed Swedish managers and these managers similarly displayed an ambivalent view of consultants who were seen both as objects of control and partners to collaborate with, external agents and close companions, outsiders and insiders (51).

The marketing director talked more specifically about content and how ideas were negotiated. He worked with one of the consultants on a reorganisation of the sales function, describing the relationship in terms of "honesty", "trust", "confidence" and "personal chemistry". He felt they understood each other and were on the same wavelength. Even so, he also described their collaboration as one where the consultant presented ideas and he demolished them. In the process, his own ways of seeing things were tested in the dialogue with the consultant. "Some ideas you buy, some give food for thought and some you know won't work".

In the situations where he stood firm on his decision that a certain change should not be implemented, the consultant eventually "matured to his perspective" as he put it. The marketing director seemed to play on the legitimacy of the internal perspective, which rendered the consultant's ideas less valid. In some situations, however, other client actors disagreed with the marketing director and the account illustrated that there is never just one internal perspective. The reorganization took shape as a mutual construction that evolved through a process of negotiation over whose interpretation and ideas should count and who should be in control. In the process, client actors with different positions, interests and perspectives played an active role in creating what became valid and what ideas were appropriated.

Consulting in action

The stories of the client managers of the nominated award projects illustrated how close collaboration potentially evolve as an ambiguous endeavour that entails complex dynamics of negotiation over ideas, position and control. In the following, I explore these processes in detail through a case study, where I had the opportunity to experience a consulting project in action.

The project I followed was a one-month assignment where a management consultancy was hired to evaluate and optimise the process quality of a government project across several Danish ministries. It was a large and enormously complex project related to government regulation. The project was midway at the time of the evaluation and had been haunted by difficulties and problems. The government agency responsible for the project was organised with a project management team consisting of five principals responsible for different parts of the project and an overall project manager. In addition, the manager of the section to which the team referred had been heavily involved in the project. The aim of the evaluation was to help the project management team learn from the process so far and make decisions on how best to manage the project onwards, solve the current problems and optimise the process.

The primary consultant on the assignment was Sarah¹. A senior consultant was also involved in workshops and key client meetings. I followed Sarah throughout the evaluation and participated in the interviews she carried out as part of her analysis. We had continuous dialogues about the issues the interviews brought up and the conclusions that formed along the way. I observed the workshop-sessions with the project team as well as the client meetings with the project manager, Christine. Christine was responsible for the evaluation and commissioned the consultancy in collaboration with her manager, the head of section. Christine worked closely with Sarah throughout the evaluation and was involved in planning activities, making decisions and discussing the issues and problems the analysis was uncovering. From the outset, Sarah related to Christine as the client in the sense of both buyer and partner in the process. Sarah went into it dialogue-orientated, as she described it, and her aim was to create an equal relation where Christine was very much involved.

The process

The first phase of the evaluation was interviewing the parties involved in the government project. Project coordinators and department heads in the different ministries, the consultants that were working on the project and the project team in the agency. At the same time, a survey was submitted to a wider selection of involved employees in the ministries. In key meetings, Christine, Sarah and the senior consultant discussed the interpretations and Christine provided additional information and explained her views on them. She exercised a strategy of dialogue and adding to the interpretations and listing all the different factors that in her view had influenced why different parts of the project had been more or less problematic. Some of these were outside the control of the project team as she saw it. It seemed important to Christine to present a complex, rich picture of the explanation factors. At the same time she was also drawing on the narratives of blame that were evident in the way the project team talked about the problems with the government project. Narratives of how particular ministries and particular consultants were to blame, not the project team. Christine did however still want recommendations for future action that the project team could act on - solutions to problems. At the first workshop with the project team, she wanted Sarah to present her hypotheses and facilitate a discussion with the team about "what we know" as she put it. The final workshop would be devoted to recommendations and making decisions.

Sarah continued her interviews and got the results of the survey. As she was making sense of the data, a different story from the existing stories of blame was beginning to emerge. A story that placed significant responsibility for the problems in the project team. At the same time Christine's manager, Martin also entered the picture. He was not directly involved in the evaluation from the beginning, but from the interviews, it was clear that he was a central character in the government project and had been much more involved in the work of the project team than Sarah expected from a section manager.

As Sarah's analysis took shape and the problems became clearer, her conclusions on the cause of them began to centre on the work culture and values of the team and on Martin. She became interested in the way he managed the team and the section in general. Her ideas about management entered into the interpretation and were evident in the areas she identified as problematic and in need of change. At the same time, her interaction with Martin

¹ All names are synonyms

also played a part. A couple of days before the first workshop she decided to brief him on the main points of the criticism and the issues that were surfacing in the interviews. Martin was surprised to be confronted with criticism of the project team and he did not agree with Sarah's interpretations. I was not present, but Sarah told me about the meeting with Martin and from then on, he became a frequent topic of discussion. Clearly, there was something at stake in their relation.

'What we know'

On the day of the first workshop, Sarah's PowerPoint-slides were organised around a first set of loose hypotheses. The workshop however took on its own life and Sarah went with it. She quickly gave up her planned structure and let it evolve into a group discussion with the project team, Christine, herself and the senior consultant. All the members of the team were very active in giving their views and interpretations of the events and the process they had gone through in working with the project. The two consultants facilitated. They alternated between listening, writing on the board and throwing in hypotheses, ideas, thoughts and the occasional practical 'gimmick' to provoke team realisations. There was a feeling of flow and increasing consensus in the room. Metaphors introduced by team members were picked up by the consultants and came to stand for things as the story, of what went wrong and why, were becoming the known.

It was as if the team moved out of the victimization they had assigned themselves and created a new narrative that did not evolve around blame. They created a new version of reality in a process of making sense of individual experiences in relation to the conclusions Sarah had drawn from her analysis of interview and survey data. A particular set of ideas and interpretations were winning the struggle with competing narratives and becoming 'what we know'. In this way, the workshop was a stage for knowledge construction and 'we' construction. Nobody, neither client actors nor consultants, had walked into the room that morning with the story that now formed current knowledge. And in the process of knowing together they had created a 'we'. The day was experienced as a success. Sarah felt the team had come very far in acknowledging their role in how the project had developed and the problems they were experiencing. Christine was also very happy with the day. She felt it had been a good process of working through and reflecting on the criticism and information that Sarah had presented.

Client and 'outsider'

Martin did not participate in the first workshop even though Sarah clearly had expected that he would. That was the reason she felt she had to brief him beforehand. Martin did however participate in the final workshop where his presence underlined how successful the story and the 'we' of the first workshop was. Sarah had written the conclusions up in short precise statements that were dealt with one by one throughout the day with the aim of making decisions on what could be done about them. Faced with Martin's critical questions the project team and Christine took on extensive ownership of the conclusions. Although the complexity was now radically reduced compared with the discussions they had in the first workshop, people felt that the story represented reality as they had come to see it. The story was

theirs as much as it was Sarah's. A common frame of reference and understanding was evident and so was the 'we' that Martin was so obviously not part of.

Martin's position in the workshop became that of 'outsider' in relation to the 'we' the first workshop had created. Sarah, Christine and the project team now shared symbols and metaphors that had become part of the story. When Martin questioned and challenged Sarah, Christine supported her views. As Sarah told me afterwards, without Christine it would not have worked. In a sense, one client actor became her ally in the struggle with another client actor. Christine, for her part, told me that she was very surprised with the way Martin reacted. She was afraid that his defensive attitude would become destructive for what they wanted to get out of the day.

Position and identity

In the interaction with Christine and the project team Sarah positioned herself by evoking similarity. She shared a social science background with them and Sarah emphasised this common identity and frame of reference. The meetings and continuous communication between Sarah and Christine were characterised by a good atmosphere and a relation that most of all resembled that of close colleagues working together on a project. Christine described it as informal and easy collaboration. None of them evoked positions of 'client' and 'consultant' in their interaction, instead they created an 'us' identified in relation to the task at hand. In the workshops, they enacted their 'us' in everything from dealing with practicalities, setting up the technical facilities and expressing their common goal.

The interaction with Martin, however, developed in an entirely different way. It was a mutual process of reacting to categorisations of each other as 'client' and 'consultant' as well as a struggle over whose definition of the situation should count. Martin became categorised as "a difficult client to work for" as Sarah expressed it. In her view, he was not open and willing to move things. Sarah was drawing on images of a particular type of client that it is both difficult and risky to work for. Martin on the other hand categorised Sarah as consultant according to negative images and stereotypes of consultants as someone willing to do anything to make money. Sarah's reaction to this negative categorisation was strong. It provoked her and challenged her identity as a consultant. As she described it, it was an extreme clash with how she thinks. She has a passion for what she does and she wants to make a difference.

In the interaction with Martin, it seemed important for Sarah to reinstate her identity and what being a consultant is all about for her. Martin was present at the final workshop and as she told me, she knew, before she walked in, that she would have to confront him with how she saw the problems in the section. She wanted to show him that she was not afraid to risk their relationship by provoking him. Martin and Sarah's relationship was characterised by this subtle conflict enacted through a combination of putting the other party 'in their place' and reinforcing self-identity. In Christine and Sarah's relation, no such actions were immediately evident. It is interesting here to explore what dynamics might influence the way their respective relations with the consultant developed, apart from things like personal chemistry and personality.

As we saw above, the final workshop revealed Martin as an 'outsider' in relation to the 'we' and the version of reality - 'what we know' - that was created in the first workshop, where he did not participate, and in the dialogue and close collaboration between Christine and Sarah. Martin had not taken part in the mutual construction of a new story that rendered existing narratives of blame less salient. At the same time, there was also something else at stake. Martin's position in the section was vitally different from that of Christine's and the team members. They experienced the problems and frustrations of the project on a daily basis and they were thirsty for ideas on how to handle the challenges of tomorrow. Martin, on the other hand, was the head of section, he was in charge and he was responsible. For him it had radically different implications to accept a narrative that placed the locus of the problem in his section and not with external agents in the form of other ministries and consultants. Furthermore, Sarah and the senior consultant introduced ideas that clashed with his understanding of management and implicitly challenged him as a manager. Thus, their relation developed as a struggle over ideas and the power to define what should count.

The issue of gender deserves a comment here. Sarah and Christine's shared gender might have played a role in facilitating their close collaboration, but gender identities were not evoked in the process. The project team comprised four men and one woman and the senior consultant was a man. Together with Christine and Sarah, they created a new story that Martin did not buy into. Sarah and the senior consultant felt that Martin did not trust consultants in general and that he was unwilling to acknowledge the issues they were raising related to the management of the section. Christine's relationship with Martin, on the other hand, was good and she experienced him as a constructive dialogue-partner in their everyday interaction. The contrast between the way she generally saw Martin and how she had seen him react in the context of this process was a source of great puzzlement to her. Clearly, a particular dynamic developed in this situation where consultants and a changed 'what we know' entered the picture.

Conclusion

The empirical material presented in this paper illustrates some of the complexities of close collaboration and mutual construction. As the CEO's story suggested the client-consultant relationship is potentially ambivalent even when it is described as close, honest and trusting. Consultants can become both close companions and objects of control. When close collaboration and a common goal and story is achieved, it implies a creation of an 'us', where the consultant becomes an 'insider' in relation to the task at hand. However this 'us' also creates a 'them', hence other client actors become 'outsiders' as the pilot case study illustrated. Client actors are differently positioned in the organization and they become differently positioned in the context of the consultancy project. In the IT-director's story, consultants became his allies in the struggle with other client actors. In the pilot case, a particular client actor became an ally of a consultant in the struggle with another client actor. Collaboration and knowledge construction involve struggles over control and position as well as the power to define what version of reality should count, what should be changed and what ideas and narratives are valid and legitimate. These struggles take place both between different client actors and between consultants and client actors. In the process, consultants and client actors potentially become allies and challengers of each other in a variety of ways.

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