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The consulting process as drama

Presenting an introduction to his book¹, *The Consulting Process as Drama – Learning from King Lear*, Erik de Haan identifies lessons to be learned from the tragedy of King Lear and addresses key issues in the art of consulting both for the leader and the organisation.

In a consulting situation the client shares a *story* with the consultant. If this story deals with important themes and if there are problems as well, it quickly embodies the elements of a dramatic account and may even assume the proportions of a drama. Having an eye for the dramatic in a client's situation can be advantageous for a consultant and also for the client. As a lover of classical drama and an experienced consultant to many 'dramatic'

leaders and organisations, I would like to make more explicit the many lessons from classical plays that inform my consulting practice. Shakespeare's *King Lear* seems to me to be highly relevant to gaining an understanding of consulting, leadership and management. Words such as *manage*, *lead*, *advise*, *counsel* and *comfort* appear in *King Lear*² much more frequently than in the other tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* or

Macbeth. It is not my intention to suggest that a consulting process always follows a dramatic or tragic course: in my experience most assignments run their course smoothly and in mutual agreement.

However, I would like to focus attention on situations and circumstances in which the consultant is truly tested.

The five 'classical' phases

Both in consulting and in drama there is a long tradition of distinguishing five phases in the process – five phases that bear a striking resemblance.

The terms in the classical tragedy have a long tradition – some clarification may help:

Five phases of the consulting process:

1. Entry: contacting and contracting
2. Diagnosis
3. Implementation
4. Consolidation
5. Ending with evaluation
see eg, Bell & Nadler³ or Block⁴

Five phases of classical tragedy:

1. Exposition
2. Development
3. Crisis and peripeteia
4. Denouement
5. Catastrophe and exodus
see, eg, Bradley⁵

1. **exposition** is the introduction of the major characters and the main issue between them
2. **development** is the unfolding of the drama where an initial decision or problematic event sets out its course
3. (a) **crisis** originally had the meaning of a 'judgement' (coming from a Greek god in Greek tragedy) and is now understood as the point of maximum tension of the unfolding drama

(b) **peripeteia** or 'upset' is the protagonist's reversal of fortune, with, simultaneously or directly following, a fundamental shift in point of view, priorities and approach
4. **denouement** is the resolution of the drama where either things get sorted in a new way, or they come to a tragic close
5. (a) **catastrophe** or 'downturn' is the final unwinding

(b) **exodus** is the moving on of all the remaining characters.

Though this may seem a very rigid scheme, the five phases are not always rigidly adhered to either in organisational consulting or in drama. Experienced consultants know that consulting does not work as smoothly as the manuals suggest and have learned through trials and tribulations to take a tragic outlook on the art of consulting. For them, there is something 'tragic' in the unavoidability of these most basic phases, as every process has a definite beginning, middle and end. Although many modern dramatists, beginning with Pirandello and Beckett, have tried to break free from classical phasing, they still find themselves with a beginning, some sort of development and an end – if only for the fact that the public will want to know when to arrive at the theatre and that the programme will end

Five tragic phases in an Action Learning assignment

Over the past three years, I have facilitated Action Learning groups of managers within a large corporation.

1. The **exposition** consisted of meeting a number of internal consultants in a skills development and coaching assignment.
2. In the **development** the Action Learning practice has slowly spread in the organisation: sitting together for half a day a month with groups of four to seven peers, consulting one another on the vicissitudes of their professional life. The assignment did not have very much overt progress, except for this slow and gradual spread of Action Learning practice. I was asked to start up new groups in other areas of the business.
3. Recently, progress seemed to come to a total standstill in one of the groups. In two consecutive sessions, the group dealt with the same case yielding the same or very similar conclusions for the manager who was the Action Learning client: a confirmation of his approach, a suggestion to let go of the worries, and some practical ideas on how to improve further. About a month after the second session I received an email with the request to come and facilitate a meeting between this manager, his boss and HR. After months of being tormented the issue had come to a **crisis**. Before coming to the meeting, I read my notes of the Action Learning sessions and was a bit puzzled as to why this 'innocent looking case' could have escalated. The meeting started when the manager again presented his case, in exactly the same way as before. But this time, as he was clearly so frustrated by trying again and again, no further questioning was done on the case itself, and no confirmation or feedback was given. We turned to the manager himself: how could **he** make such a small issue so big and important? What was this issue telling us about himself and his managerial style?
4. The meeting took more than three hours and ended on an emotional note, when the manager discovered he had never been responsible for the issue in the first place, and had taken it up to prove something to himself, and perhaps to become like a 'white knight' for his department. After this total reversal of perspective (**peripeteia**), the manager finally relaxed and became emotional in a different way, moved, mildly embarrassed for his case, warm, and somehow grateful.
5. On my initiative, we will have an email exchange within a few months, to see whether a resolution (**denouement**) of all his efforts and of the recent meeting will come about. Finally, we will meet again with the Action Learning group after about a year, to celebrate that his Action Learning group will then be self-facilitated for a year. It will be an exodus I very much look forward to!

before the onset of night. The same applies to organisational consulting: in spite of heroic attempts to put the end at the beginning or to conceive of a circular process, by means of

approaches such as simulations and survey-feedback cycles, a consulting intervention remains a time-bounded collaborative relationship with a beginning, middle and end.

Consulting as fearless speech

I can still remember with great clarity an assignment in a factory about seven years ago, where I was asked to look at ways of improving collaboration in the Quality department. Initially, I was asked to conduct interviews with all twenty members of the department. The interviews were confidential and turned out to be very unsettling. Individuals told me about racism, aggression and sexual harassment in the long history of the tight group of 20 men. Some individuals gave me examples, others expressed their lack of confidence that anything would be done about it, as it had been going on and condoned for so many years. I wrote my report in which I was most critical of the manager of the department, in spite of the fact that he had not been directly involved in any of the incidents. I wrote how in my opinion it was mainly the managerial style that had allowed this to happen and to fester.

Before delivering this report to my main client, the Technical Director, I had to discuss it with the manager of the department. I remember having practised this conversation with a few colleagues, as I was expecting it to be tough. When I finally sat down and told the manager what was in my report, reality turned out to be worse than my greatest fears. He was thoroughly shocked, became extremely angry and shouted that in over 20 years in this position nobody had ever said such a thing to him, after which he ran off to complain about me to the CEO. After several conversations with directors, in which it seemed that I was the one who had to defend himself, my main client had the shrewdness and audacity to ask me for another assignment, namely to facilitate the necessary changes in that same Quality department...

I had to work closely together with a client who profoundly disliked me but had no other choice than to work with me. Over the course of a year, I believe his feeling about me never changed. But he did trust that I would speak openly and fearlessly, and that I would not hold back my impressions and opinions, like many of his colleagues and superiors had done so often before.

Being in the moment

So how does a consultant respond to the challenges of beginning, middle and end? First, a consultant should have a clear view of the relationship with the client and its unfolding over the different phases. It is helpful for both clients and consultants to appreciate some key aspects of the consulting relationship as it evolves – corresponding to definitions of consulting that match the five phases as they were introduced above:

- (Entry) Consulting is *speaking one's mind* openly and truly – without fear of the consequences⁶. The client or client organisation often goes unchallenged or without receiving much information as to their effects on other people or other organisations. They should therefore be able to rely on the fact that the consultant speaks his or her mind, in full confidentiality and without reservation.

While working towards solutions, consultants try to avoid making themselves part of the solution. Clients prefer to be able to find their own new approach and sustain it.

- (Diagnosis) Consulting is *exploration* – listening to and interpreting whatever the client brings. Clients often come to a consultant to find out more about themselves, to reflect on their actions and to discover hidden weaknesses or emerging strengths.
- (Implementation) Consulting is *self-monitoring* and *self-directing* – the ability to reflect on one's own actions while one performs these same actions. All consulting occurs in the relationship and takes place while client and consultant actually meet. The consultant should be especially sensitive to what goes on in that moment of contact. Clients will be busy working through their issues so it is mostly up to the consultant to monitor the relationship in which this can take place.
- (Consolidation) Consulting is *being with and facilitating change* – respecting the autonomous and independent nature of that change. It is not always easy to say which are the responsibilities of the client and which are the consultant's (see also next paragraph). The responsibility for

managing the outcome of an assignment is definitely the client's and therefore the consultant contributes by helping the client or client organisation take that responsibility.

- (Ending) Consulting is *letting go of the client and the client's fortunes* – practising detachment vis-à-vis the change that one as a consultant has personally become involved in. While working towards solutions, consultants try to avoid making themselves part of the solution. Clients prefer to be able to find their own new approach, and sustain it.

(It has perhaps crossed some readers' minds that 'giving advice' is not part of these five key aspects of consulting. This is deliberate: I do not think that giving advice should belong to the five aspects).

There is a natural flow in these five definitions, though it is my conviction that every one of these aspects of consulting is simultaneously present if one is in the 'consulting state of mind'. How does one enter this state of mind that is consulting? My answer is: by noting what takes place at every single moment, here and now, in the relationship with the client. If one can be fully aware of what is going on here and now and note it, one is, whether consciously or subconsciously, practising the art of consulting.

Learning from Lear (fearless speech)

King Lear affords beautiful examples of entry conversations, as there are three very different consultants in the play: the Earl of Kent, the Fool and Edgar, son of Gloucester. Moreover, Kent is banished from the kingdom in the first act, but re-enters in disguise, holding another, very professional 'entry conversation' with Lear ("*I do profess to be no less than I seem*" – Act I, Scene 4). Just before being banned, Kent embodies the

quality of bold, fearless speech, which is so important in consultants. He stands up for Cordelia and presents Lear with the essential facts of the matter (Act I, Scene 1):

- Power bows to flattery
- A decision is being taken rashly
- Cordelia's love for her father is being grossly underestimated.

Lear, however, does not wish to be criticised and expels Kent forthwith.

The consultant should approach the entry situation as neutrally as possible, trying to free himself as much as possible from preconceptions and biases, and at the same time from any self-serving desire to move forward. Examples of a few questions to start in a neutral tone:

- What can I do for you?
- What brings you here?
- What shall we discuss?
- Please, feel free to commence...

After posing one of these, the consultant will listen, summarise, and structure whatever may come up.

In this first phase of the process, 'consulting' is established. Consulting is not a form of rhetoric, and it is not flattery. Consulting can be most closely associated with 'speaking one's mind', which is the ancient concept of 'parrhesia' (Foucault, 1985) and is sometimes called 'being authentic'⁴. Consulting often starts with a summary of what the client brings, which can be daring enough if also the client's emotions and approach towards his problem are summarised.

The assumption of too much responsibility by the consultant may, for instance, lead to a loss of autonomy on the part of the client. The objective is to achieve a delicate balance of shared responsibility.

A key to the play: responsibility

In the first two acts, Lear does little with the major consulting talents in his immediate environment. He does not yet understand that by abdicating responsibility for his own destiny he also relinquishes his honour and his prestige. He will now have to accept as his superiors, those whom he himself nurtured. The Fool puts it in rhyme: *Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind / But fathers that bear bags / Shall see their children kind* (Act II, Scene 4). His daughters' indifference comes as a complete surprise and he does not know how to react other than by throwing tantrums. The play *King Lear* is largely about the theme of taking responsibility for one's own role and situation. Lear's first actions in the play, in which the King abdicates completely his responsibilities, prove to be fatal to him, to his country and to his daughters. In line with the conventions of classical tragedy, fate does not have mercy on the failing protagonist.

Responsibility is also one of the cornerstones of a successful consulting process, together with empathy and trust⁴. Responsibility differentiates itself from the other two cornerstones in that 'more' is not always 'better'. The assumption of too much responsibility by the consultant may, for instance, lead to a loss of autonomy on the part of the client. The objective is to achieve a delicate balance of shared responsibility.

Something comes from nothing

An example from a recent coaching conversation: the coachee is silent at the start of the conversation and looks at the coach in a wait-and-see mode. The coach looks back with a friendly smile and full of expectation. The situation starts to resemble a children's game in which players try to outstare each other without blinking or looking away, until the coachee shrugs her shoulders and bursts out slightly provocatively "Oh well, I suppose I'll have to do it myself then... that's what you're trying to tell me, isn't it? I decide what to talk about." Whereupon the coach ignores his own inclinations to (1) give a response, (2) start to structure the conversation and (3) interpret the coachee's striking behaviour, and – perhaps out of shyness, perhaps because no other specific option presents itself – keeps smiling in a friendly and inviting way. Until the following sentence issues forth: "What do you want to talk about today? We agreed to look at specific practical issues, but also at your career development. Do you want to start somewhere?" There is another short silence, until the coachee clears her throat and says: "You know, I've prepared this conversation and have already gone through a few things." The unaccustomed openness, willingness and compliance of the coach at the start of this conversation makes such an impression that the coachee refers to it frequently in subsequent conversations: "You showed me then that I could really bring anything to these conversations."

Conclusion: something can come of nothing

The client who is willing to share his dramatic story with the consultant has found himself in an unpleasant situation without having had the ability to resolve it. Such is certainly the case for Lear in the beginning of the play. *The Consulting Process as Drama* shows that Lear's initial response – his maxim expressed twice, in Act I, Scene 1: Nothing will come of nothing, and Act I, Scene 4: Nothing can be made out of nothing – is precisely the attitude that his consultants are helping him most with. So for the leader and the organisational consultant, the most important thing King Lear has to offer can be formulated as the reverse of this maxim. The reverse would be: something can come of nothing. It is crucial to consulting that a consultant allows space for reflection, for the 'real' issues to emerge and for the 'true' solutions to be found.

In *The Consulting Process as Drama* three brief lessons are learned for the consultant:

1. Make sure your clients manage to accept the situation they are in
2. Make sure you do not become part of the issues yourself
3. Do not try to pull the client out of his unfortunate situation at all costs.

Briefer still: if you respond mindfully in the 'consulting state of mind' and continue to bring out what is going on in the relationship between client and consultant, something will have to come from nothing, if only because change is the normal course of events. In fact, not changing is impossible for any living system.

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