The Foreign Consultant's Role in Newly Developing Countries

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International aid programs involve more than the transfer of money, material, and manpower; they also involve the transfer of ideas, usually by the formal process of consultation. It is the purpose of this paper to consider the application of principles of consultation to the role of the consultant in foreign aid programs, and to indicate some of the special considerations dictated by the nature of such programs.*

Broadly speaking, "consultation is a process by which expert knowledge and skills are transmitted in a relationship between consultant and consultee for the purposes of problem-solving."[1] The client (hereafter in this paper the "consultee" will be referred to as the "client") is generally a person who is seeking technical help in the area of his professional responsibilities in order more effectively to discharge those responsibilities. Charlotte Towle has noted certain characteristics of traditional forms of consultation: the seeking by one person of the help of another; the basic grounding of the client in the field in which he is seeking help from the expert; the freedom of a client to accept or reject consultation; and the payment by the client for consultation.[2] She has also pointed out that consultation within the context of an agency becomes more complex because the authoritative figures in the agency may have requested consultation on behalf of the client; because the consultant may be anxious when faced with the uncertain goals and content of consultation; and because a coercive element may be introduced when the consultant is the agent of the organization that is financially supporting the client's program.

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These difficulties, in addition to others, are likely to be present in consultation in international programs. The consultant who goes abroad must recognize these departures from traditional consultation and be prepared psychologically to cope with them if he is to avoid the frustration not infrequently suffered by those who have had experience in international consultation.

This writer will deal with these differences and their implications within the framework of seven questions which, Lippitt[3] suggests, a consultant must ask himself during the course of a consulting relationship. The first question concerns definition of the problem, its origin, and the forces that are maintaining it. This, of course, implies some theoretical frame of reference which will guide the consultant's analysis of the problem. Consultants in international programs must, however, be sufficiently flexible so that they do not structure all their observations in terms of their theoretical orientation or their previous experience in application of theory to problem situations in their home culture. The international consultant must have sufficient inner security that he may view his conceptual frame of reference as tentative and be willing continually to test its transferability. Although there are undoubtedly some universal truths that are not culture bound, the consultant must be ready to admit that he is not already in full possession of all of these. Further, the consultant may not be able to identify which components of his theoretical frame of reference are culture-bound and which are cross-cultural. A knowledge of the culture of the client becomes, therefore, an important aspect of international consultation, for the purpose not only of facilitating the consultant's personal adjustments but also of achieving the objectives of consultation.

Lippitt's second question is "What are my motives for becoming involved in this helping relationship? What are the bases of my desire to promote change?"[4] It is, of course, not a new concept to those in the "helping professions" that a professional helper must accept responsibility for a high level of self-awareness about his own values and needs as they influence the helping relationship. In view of the frequently encountered vagueness of the client's definition of his problem and the additional dimension of cultural differences, it is likely that the international consultant's motives and values may affect his perception of the problem and his role in relation to it. The relatively unstructured nature of the problem situation lends increased importance to the consultant's degree of self-awareness and to the limits he sets on his license to intervene in the client system. The motives of the consultant are difficult to unravel, and he may not be conscious of all the forces which motivate him. Motivation may be achievement for the sake of career advancement; motivation may simply be the personal satisfaction which comes from doing well a professional task. These motives are not mutually exclusive nor should differential value be placed on them. Whatever the consultant's motivation, he needs to maintain objectivity, keeping his motives from affecting his evaluations of what is to be done, of how it is to be done, and of what he has done. Objectivity can be facilitated if the consultant is given assurance that job rewards are not necessarily tied to the concrete accomplishments of his mission. This would help to enhance the validity of the consultant's evaluation both of actual and potential accomplishments of the project. The development of vested interest on the part of the consultant in perpetuation of his project is not an uncommon one, particularly for career consultants in the international field.

The fact that international consultation involves a country's specific request for assistance and the fact that the consultant's appointment is subject to the prospective client's approval after a thorough review of his credentials may give false assurance that the question of what justifies intervention will not arise. Such justification frequently does become a real issue. The consultant may find, after arrival in the requesting country, that motivation and capacity are not present in quality and quantity sufficient for the client to make effective use of consultation. The initially assumed justification, namely, the request for an expert, may not be sustained. The consultant then is faced with the issue of deciding what, if anything, does justify his entering into the client system. Should he retire from the scene as gracefully as possible? Should he remain for the duration of the contract and enjoy a tourist role? Should he search for avenues of service other than through the consultation project? Should he seek to establish a common ground with his client and redefine the consultation project? The choice will largely depend on the response to the remaining of Lippitt's questions.

The third question for the consultant is "What seems to be the present, or potential, motivations of the client toward change and against change?"[8] Dissatisfaction with the present situation may be the primary dynamic for change in the case of individuals; in fact, the client's discomfort may be as good a measure of his motivation in the consultation situation as it is in the casework situation. Lippitt points out, however, that an organization's request for consultation may be motivated by what he calls "images of potentiality," as compared with an individual's request, which may be motivated by awareness of present difficulties. The former motivation is especially common in international consultation, involving as it usually does newly developing countries which are trying in the shortest possible time to realize long-ignored potentials.

The international consultant, then, must be oriented toward helping the client to achieve his potential instead of being "problem-oriented." The foreign client not only may not have defined his problem but also he may not even feel that he has a problem. One might well wonder what motivated the request for consultation. Cynically, we might conjecture that the consultation request was prepared perhaps by the preceding consultant and was acceded to by the client, who may have no investment at stake and who may welcome any distinguished visitor so long as no substantial financial responsibility is incurred by the client. On the other hand, frequently there is the vague feeling that a consultant would be useful, but no significant problems have been identified. International consultants often hear the protest: "If

I knew what my problems were, then I would not need you." The traditionally oriented consultant who insists on the presence of a problem, might, on hearing this complaint, decide that the client was not ready for consultation and withdraw from the consultative relationship. Exasperating as it may be to the consultant to receive that reaction at the conclusion of a long journey from his home to the client's country, there is some truth to the client's lament. The consultant should not, however, be concerned by the excessive dependence which he may see reflected in the client's protest that he needed to be told what his problems were. The consultant may have to be directive, even aggressive in his approach, although the degree to which he has been accepted will determine how much initiative he may take. The danger is, of course, that the consultant's interpretation of the problems that exist may be accepted only intellectually by the client, and that the latter will not have any emotional investment in the solution of problems which another person has identified for him.

Foreign consultants may find also that their clients do not have the minimum level of competence necessary in order to take advantage of consultation. In this case, they may have to act as teachers of their clients. The temptation to take over operational roles, actually to administer programs, may also be great. Although it may appear that such intervention is welcomed by the floundering client, this writer doubts the wisdom of this modern expression of the idea of the "white man's burden." Driven by the need to produce results, to achieve concrete objectives, the consultant may take over administrative functions, thereby fostering dependency and stifling the development and initiative of his client. Some international consultants have, in fact, chosen such a resolution of the dilemma. This writer would be the first to admit that one can overemphasize the importance of process at the expense of achieving certain specific goals; however, he cannot refrain from viewing the consultant's assumption of an operational role as a usurpation of indigenous responsibility, no matter how willing the abdicating client has been to transfer his burden to the consultant.

Lippitt emphasizes the importance to motivational analysis of a study of the interdependence between the subparts in the client system. "Learning about the supporting and conflicting relationships between subgroups is a crucial task, and success in getting these facts will determine to a great degree whether the consultant is able to develop the necessary and appropriate relationship to the total group and to its various subparts."* The international consultant who is dealing with an administrative hierarchy and with diverse collateral organizations must be especially discreet lest he appear to be identified with the interests of one subgroup. He must consider the fact that the consultation project may have been formulated by an upper echelon group in the client system without the participation, perhaps even without the knowledge, of the lower echelon groups who will be directly involved in the consultation process. The highly placed person may freely admit, without jeopardizing his own emotional security, the professional deficiencies of a subordinate. A serious problem may result when those with whom the consultant must work directly do not feel the need for the service and, further, may actually resist a service which they perceive to be a reflection on their adequacy. Even clients who have asked for consultation, and who therefore are less likely than the involuntary client to be threatened by the connotation of personal incompetence implicit in consultation, may evidence ambivalence. If for no other reason, the client may have anxiety about what the consultant, who perforce has an intimate look into his thought processes, thinks of him.

Since the subordinate in the client system does not usually have the option of rejecting consultation that has been arranged for him, his resistance may be deviously expressed. It may be manifested in unconstructive inertia, or in active undermining of the consultant. On the other hand, he may build up the consultant to flattering proportions. The consultant may become concerned that extravagant evaluations of his reputation may lead to unrealistic expectations of him by the client, and he may discourage the latter from engaging in such self-deceit. My feeling is that frequently the client's magnification of the consultant's proficiency is largely a device to make more palatable the consultant's presence. The consultant might better accept graciously the greatness that has been thrust upon him; otherwise, he might be robbing his client of a defense mechanism. Under such circumstances, the consultant must guard against developing an exaggerated sense of his own importance. It is, of course, also possible that the plan for the consultation may have originated at a lower echelon of the client system and the desire and awareness of the consultation of members of the upper echelon may be minimal, if not entirely absent. In any event, the different degrees of investment of various subparts in the client system in the success of the consultation project may set limits to what can be accomplished.

Another problem encountered by reason of the need to relate to a client system is that various levels in the hierarchy represented by the system may try to make use of the consultant in obtaining information denied to them as a result of their position in the hierarchy. This again works both ways, that is, the lower levels in the client system may want to know what is going on at the top, and the top may want to know what is going on at the bottom. Both groups may depend on the consultant to bring them intelligence reports. It is up to the consultant in this case to maintain focus on his mission. It may even become necessary for him, depending on how subtle have been the demands on him by the various parts of the client system, to point out to an individual that it is not his function to find out for that person what is going on in other parts of the system. At the same time, such items of intelligence may very well be directly related to the success of the consultation project. This poses a delicate problem. How non-aligned should the consultant be when alignment with certain members of the client system may make for greater progress of the project than alignment with others? The consultant must always emphasize that his advice on any point is dictated by the best interests of the project to which he has been assigned and is not dictated by the personal interests of any individual clients. This may be difficult to do inasmuch as the members of the client system who will seek the consultant's special support, or who will seek to use the consultant as a "spy," may have little difficulty in rationalizing that use of the consultant is desirable in the interests of the program.

The fourth question posed by Lippitt is "What are my resources, as a consultant, for giving the kind of help that seems to be needed now, or that may develop?"[7] Lippitt, pointing out that consultation involves two types of skills—the analytical skill for the purpose of making diagnoses and the skills for implementation of any action suggested by the diagnosis—recommends having a consultant team. Apparently he believes this would give more continuity to consultation, assuming that the team members would terminate their services at different times and further assuming that members of the team would have among them various skills which might be required for the project. Consulting teams offer another advantage in that they serve to challenge the capacities of the various members. Frequently, in consulting in foreign countries, one may be relatively isolated professionally. The wearing of the mantle of the expert without challenge, together with receiving the deference usually tendered the expert, may make him feel omniscient. The presence of a consultant colleague may avoid this undesirable outcome. It is important that the members of any consultant team share a common orientation to the objective of their project, have clearly defined roles, and accept these roles. Danger lies in the possibility of having a consulting team, the members of which have not had the opportunity of working together before and do not have a common frame of reference. Under these circumstances, individual consultants may vie for favor with the client group, aligning support for their divergent opinions among the clients and disorganizing them by the implicit or explicit demonstration of disagreement among the experts.

The optimum time for a period of consultation is, so far as this writer is concerned, still an unsettled question. The statement that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion"[8] is not entirely frivolous. Time limits are helpful in exerting pressure upon both the consultant and the client to mobilize resources and achieve the goals of the program. The period of time necessary for optimum utilization of a consultant depends on several factors:

1. "Mechanical" difficulties, such as finding housing, acquiring furnishings and such amenities as may be locally important.

2. Cultural difficulties, having to do with the degree of "culture-shock," language barriers, etc. The impact on both the consultant and his family must be considered because family related problems will affect the consultant's performance.

3. Consultation problems, such as client motivation, capacity, and stability. Also important is the nature of the project, that is, whether it requires only analysis and diagnosis of a problem, or also involves implementation of advice.

Lippitt's fifth question is "What preliminary steps of action are needed to explore and establish a consulting relationship?"[9] The possibility of a pilot project or trial period for the purpose of exploring a possible consulting relationship is particularly important in international consultation. Such a trial period provides an opportunity to establish relationships to all of the different subgroups in a client system, to clarify readiness for change, and to determine the nature of the consultant's role. Getting into contact with the "whole client" is one of the most challenging problems for the international consultant, who frequently has more than one counterpart. It is not unusual for international consultants to have several different individuals with whom they consult at any time during the course of a project. The length of time required for consultation may be a function of whether such pre-consultation has taken place. The consultant's sponsoring organizations should make this preliminary exploration in considerable detail. It might be said that the consultant should do this "spade work" himself; however, practical considerations dictate that this be done before the arrival of the consultant, particularly when his period of availability may be limited.

Lippitt's sixth question is "How do I, as consultant, guide and adapt to the different phases of the process of changing?"[10] Lippitt, *et al.* identified seven phases of consultation: (1) the development of a need for change; (2) the establishment of a consulting relationship; (3) clarification of a client problem; (4) the examination of alternative solutions and goals; (5) the transformation of intentions into actual change efforts; (6) the generalization and stabilization of a new level of functioning or group structure; (7) achieving a terminal relationship with the consultant and a continuity of change ability.[11] These phases can be analyzed with reference to the nature of the consultation skills which will facilitate achievement of the objectives of each phase. The first three phases may call largely for skills in the process of consultation; the latter, for skills in training. Lippitt points out that the attitude of the consultant most appropriate to the former role may be a non-directive one, in contrast to the directiveness appropriate to the training role. This writer has already indicated that international consultation may require considerable directiveness throughout the relationship. It should be recognized that a large amount of overlap may be present among the various phases; hence, the consultant must be versatile enough to play the role appropriate at any given time. He must be able to help the client to formulate goals as well as to teach him the skills necessary to achieve the goals. If the consultant has been successful in the initial phases and has stimulated the client to delineate his problems and to want to do something about them, then it will indeed be disheartening if he does not have the skill to help them through the remaining phases or if he does not have the time to do so.

Lippitt's last question is "How do I help promote a continuity of creative changeability?"[12] Consultation is successful to the degree to which not only the initial problem has been resolved but also to the degree to which the client's competence to cope independently with future difficulties has been enhanced. The criteria for success must include both components. If the client has not reached some level of achievement with respect to immediate goals, then he will not have the feeling of self-confidence on which further achievement can be based, and which will enable him to take the inevitable future failures in stride. International consultation may involve redefinition of immediate goals so that they are feasible. The levels of aspiration are likely to be impracticably high because newly developing countries typically feel under pressure to compress their development within short time spans. On the one hand, it is the international consultant's function to help the client to quicken the pace of progress by taking advantage of lessons offered by the evolution of similar programs elsewhere; on the other hand, the consultant may have to slow the client if conditions crucial to sound progress are not present.

Continuity of consultation depends not only on the consultant but also on the client. Not infrequently in international consultation, the rate of turnover of client personnel may exceed that of consultant personnel. Assurances of stability of client personnel should be a precondition to establishment of a consultation project; however, the practices followed by many newly developing countries may result in frequent transfer of civil servants, particularly at the administrative levels in the client system. Such transfer may take one's client into a field entirely different from that of the consultation project.

Eventually, of course, it is the consultant's goal to do himself out of a job. He must avoid developing any investment in continuing the project beyond the point where it has outlived its need. The deference which an international consultant may receive, the client's tendency to exaggerate the consultant's expertness, the consultant's control over grants-in-aid, fellowships for foreign study, etc., make it easy for the consultant to fall into a paternalistic pattern of behavior. He must avoid any action which tends to tie the client to his "apron strings." Beckhard has suggested that consultants should withdraw for periods of time so as to permit the client some independence of action.[13] A planned break in the consultation project would offer the client the opportunity of testing out any learning gained in the consultation relationship. Also, an occasional interlude at home may provide an antidote to the overweening pride to which international consultants are vulnerable and restore the requisite humility.

The problems of international consultation probably differ more in degree than in kind from those of traditional consultation, but the consultant who is conscious neither of the basic principles nor of their application in international settings may be ineffective and frustrated. This is not to place the ones for the success or failure of consultation projects entirely on the shoulders of the consultant. A set of questions, analogous to those Lippitt poses to the consultant, could also be developed for each prospective client to ask himself. It is the writer's impression that many organizations which sponsor international consultative programs have not, unfortunately, been sufficiently aware of the fact that consultants must have competence not only in their substantive fields but also in the consultant-client relationships. The affective aspects of international consultation loom as large as the intellectual aspects. Knowledge and skill related to the process of consultation per se is as important as both knowledge of the substantive aspects of the field in which the consultant is operating and skill in the application of that knowledge to a foreign situation.

NOTES

1. The Workshop on the Consultation Process, "Closing Summary" (Chicago: School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, 1951), p. 1 (mimeographed).

2. Charlotte Towle, "Consultation: Frame of Reference for Group Discussion and Application in Specific Situations" (Chicago: School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, 1949), p. 1 (mimeographed).

3. Ronald Lippitt, "Dimensions of the Consultant's Job," *The Journal of Social Issues,* XV (1959), 5–12.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

7. *Ibid.*

8. C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law and Other Studies in Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962), p. 2.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

11. *Ibid.*, citing Ronald Lippitt, Jeanne Watson, and Bruce Westley, *The Dynamics of Planned Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Co., 1958).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

13. Richard Beckhard, "Helping a Group With Planned Change: A Case Study," *The Journal of Social Issues*, XV (1959), 19.