TRANSFORMING CONSULTANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS INTO BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT: A MODEL AND ACTION AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

As the company grows, successful small business owners often find their management lacks sufficient sophistication. They are good at what they do, but a small staff cannot be knowledgeable in all areas of business. Seeking solutions to major growing pains, many owners engage consultants. The aim is improving the dynamics of running the company. The use of consultants is a way for small businesses to gain quick, access to management expertise. Unfortunately, too often, both the owner and the consultant feel frustration at the conclusion of the consulting engagement. The owner feels the consultant's recommendations are too general. The consultant is disappointed with the owner's follow-up on key recommendations. No one is willing to take responsibility for implementation.

This article explores how to deal with the follow-up challenge. It covers four main topics: why business owners do not follow-up; why consultants do not follow-up; an eight-part model for organized improvement; and an action agenda for improved follow-up. Both owners and consultants can use the action agenda to help turn consultant's recommendations into business improvement. An appendix offers advice to Small Business Institute directors and advisors guiding student consultants.

INTRODUCTION

How often have you been disappointed with the results from a consulting engagement? Too often both the owner and the consultant feel short changed. The consultant feels he or she has done a good diagnosis and made sound recommendations. The owner acknowledges the value of the proposed improvements. Everyone should be happy. However, six months later the business has made little progress. In retrospect, the owner feels the consultant's recommendations are too general. More information about the problem and a generic list of "you-should-dos" is not enough. Why didn't the consultant follow-up and solve the problem? Moreover, the consultant is disappointed with the owner's follow-up on key recommendations. The game plan is clear in the final report. Why didn't the owner follow-up and solve the problem? Everyone is disappointed.

Lack of follow-up is a common challenge. Too many consulting engagements end with the owner and the consultant trying to fix the blame rather than trying to fix the problem. No one is willing to take responsibility for implementation.

This paper explores how to deal with the follow-up challenge. It first summarizes reasons why clients and consultants do not follow up. Next, it proposes an eight-part model to help consultants and owners transform consulting recommendations into business improvement in an organized way. Finally, the paper incorporates the model into a Consultant's Action Agenda. Both small business owners and consultants can use this agenda to turn recommendations into client improvements. Owners and consultants alike will benefit from learning how to approach business improvement in an organized way.

WHY BUSINESS OWNERS DO NOT FOLLOW-UP

We propose that learning is a decision. In our view, a "General Rule of Learning" applies to client follow-up on a consultant's recommendations. We synthesize this rule from personal experience with hundreds of consulting projects. Also, we draw upon the observations of other consultants ("A Small Company," 1980; Bruckman & Iman, 1980; Fournies, 1987; Maurer, 1996; Van Voorhis, 1980). The General Rule of Learning is that learning is a value-added calculation. The learner's justification for the effort and risk of learning something new lies in anticipated satisfaction. The learner will learn new ways if the learner perceives the new ways as "improvement," i.e.,

(1) The learning adds value vis-a-vis the learner's needs. It adds more value than the learner could add on his/her own by following present learning, or by adopting other competitive new learning.

(2) The learning costs the learner the minimum stake. It costs less than required by present or competitive learning. It minimizes all costs that do not contribute directly to added value.

When faced with lack of follow-up, the consultant might argue that the business owner is ignorant, unorganized, lacking in courage, or otherwise deficient. However, in our experience, one thing is probably true. The owner has followed the General Rule of Learning and perceives the follow-up is not worth it. The General Rule will not change. The only way to get a different result is to get the owner to change his/her perception of value-added data and formulae. When the consultant "hits the wall," he or she must back track and rethink how to demonstrate value.

Further, we think the consultant must make a convincing demonstration (Barry, 1991; Fournies, 1987; Maurer, 1996; Pierce, 1991). Right or wrong, it appears to us that value added calculations are stable. You can anticipate that the owner will not normally stop doing "what works" to experiment with what might work. In the rush of daily deadlines, the business owner naturally avoids committing to anything else but doing the day's work. He or she infrequently pauses to observe the performance of the business and ponder how to improve it. In other words, without evidence of need or opportunity, the owner will not reorganize his/her workday to give improvement a high priority. Without the owner's commitment, the job of improvement will not be done.

As we see it, the consultant's job is to build the case for needed improvements. This requires planning and hands-on effort throughout the consulting engagement. We agree with Bruckman and Iman who point out that:

> "The consulting project normally entails the consultants submitting data previously unknown to the client for his or her inspection. Key members of the client's system are often too ego-involved in the activities of the business to analyze organization problems objectively. The consultants can rarely expect instant acceptance of their ideas, so they must develop strategies for fair assessment of their proposals, as reasonable and workable plans. In part, resolving this problem involves laying the ground work for commitment, understanding and support early in the project. . . . Consultants must also develop plans for presenting and marketing their proposals. . . .
>
> The energy generated by effective consulting often vaporizes in the absence of follow-up plans or when implementation of solutions begin to threaten the client. In planning consulting projects, time should be budgeted for follow-up procedures. The consulting team should also support the client during the initial stages of implementation." (Bruckman & Iman, 1980, p. 45-46).

To sum up, we think business owners do not follow up on consultant's recommendations because they choose not to. They do not perceive the follow-up is worth it. Improvements do not automatically follow when consultants determine recommendations are significant. The owner must determine significance and commit to improvement. Without follow-up by the consultant to show value and encourage action, the owner will not follow up. The owner will put off indefinitely the additional responsibilities of implementation. An important part of a successful consulting process is hands-on teaching by the consultant that includes coaching during the initial stages of implementation.

WHY CONSULTANTS DO NOT FOLLOW-UP

Howard Shenson, a successful consultant and small business owner, describes what a client wants when he hires a consultant,

> In the simplest of terms, clients usually seek out a consultant who can solve a problem, prevent a problem, or help attain some gain they don't believe they can achieve without outside help. In short, clients seek results. They may have only a general sense of what a desired result should look like when they first retain you. Part of your job then is to help describe more specifically an acceptable result. Nevertheless, what the client is paying for is results... A practical result, not an academically perfect or theoretically correct solution to a problem, is what you must be concerned about. The optimal solution may exist, but it almost always costs too much in terms of money or time to be practical. A business can go bankrupt trying to be perfect. Consultants work in the real world, which involves looking for the best solution that can be produced within the budgeted time and money. That solution is usually suboptimal and yet satisfactory. (Shenson and Nichols, 1997, p. 86-87)

Many consultants, particularly those trained by major firms, do not see things quite this way. They do see themselves as problem solvers. However, they don't see themselves as coaches or

teachers who role up their sleeves and work things out *with* the client. According to John Quay, who trains consultants for such firms as Coopers and Lybrand and Ernst and Young, they see themselves as

> "business diagnosticians – problem solvers from outside the company... who, in a limited time frame, must gather sufficient data, analyze them, and come up with solutions or conclusions." (Quay, 1994, p. xiii)

Quay points out, that in his experience

> while consultants and auditors suffer from the usual array of blind spots and prejudices, they are particularly susceptible to intellectual conceit. They tend to agree with Puck's sentiments in A Midsummer Night's Dream, What fools these mortals be! This viewpoint stems primarily from repeated exposure to client problems, some of which must seem to outsiders to be self-induced and indeed foolish. This supercilious attitude will show through if not controlled or dispelled. (Quay, 1994, p. 61)

Such consultants may hide their disdain from the business owner, but they let it color their approach to the engagement. They take an "integrative, top management perspective," thinking they possess all the expertise and wisdom (Merwin, 1987). Self confident (and arrogant?) they feel they can learn nothing from the owner beyond data on the current situation. Further, they underestimate the owner's ability to learn. Often such consultants' final recommendations confront the client -- challenging the client's methods rather than encouraging improvement. After they present their findings they are ready to move on with great self-confidence to "save" the next company. They give little thought to nurturing a long-term, ongoing involvement with the owner. As they interpret the General Rule of Learning, follow up is not worth the effort. They do not accept responsibility for implementation.

To sum up, we think many consultants do not follow up on their recommendations because they choose not to. They do not perceive the follow-up is worth it. They structure their engagements so they receive final payment and can move on when they hand the final report to the owner. Improvements do not automatically follow when consultants determine recommendations are significant. However, the consultant doesn't see this as his or her problem. It is the owner's problem. If the owner is unwilling to commit to improvement, so be it. Based on the consultant's general opinion of the owner, the consultant accepts no responsibility for implementation. Many consultants simply do not see that hands-on teaching is an important part of the consulting process. They do not include modeling and coaching in their game plan.

ORGANIZED IMPROVEMENT: AN EIGHT-PART MODEL

What does it take for a consulting process to improve a small business in an organized way (Ames, 1994; Barry, 1991; Pierce, 1991; Wesner, 1995)? We suggest owners and consultants employ a balanced, eight-part model. The parts required are diagnosis, preparation, presentation, modeling, coaching, installation, and evaluation. An eighth part, data management, supports the others. Appropriate tracking and reporting of data allow improvement initiatives to be based on facts rather than on intuition. Figure 1 presents our model as an iterative process flow or work cycle.

Figure 1
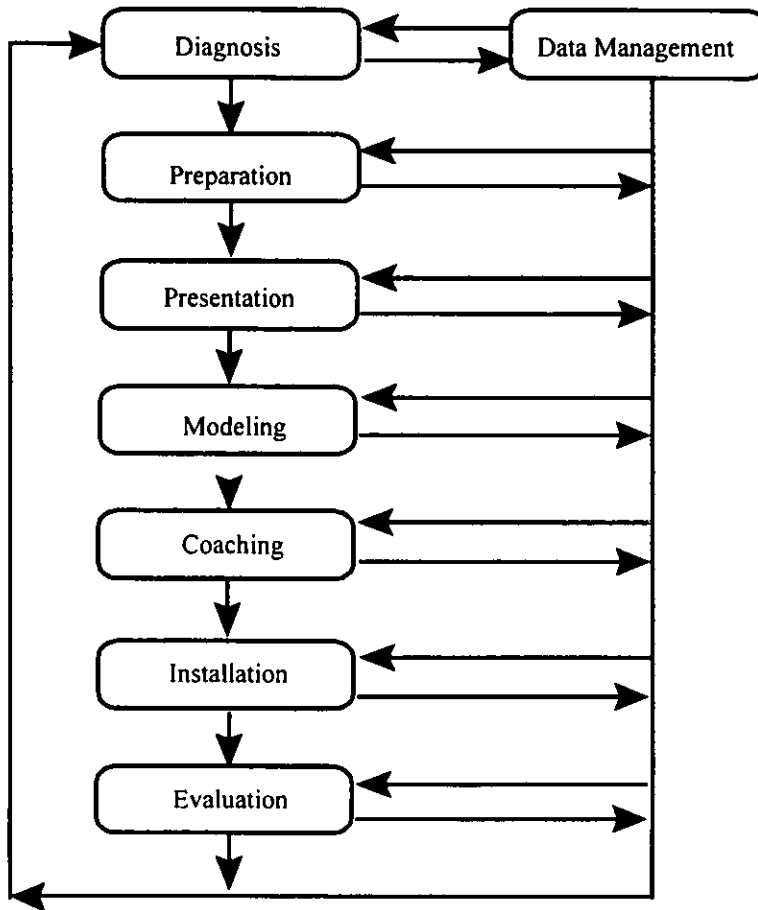**Eight Part Model as an Iterative Process Flow**

Figure 2 illustrates the impact of the balanced use of the eight-part model. In our view, too many consultants focus on diagnosis and presentation, assuming it is the owner's responsibility to implement. Too many owners expect consultants to hand them a "cook book" or "turn key" installation along with the final consulting report. They are disappointed when the consultant asks them to assume responsibility for implementation. We believe this mutual avoidance of responsibility typically leads to ineffective follow-up. We depict the disappointing results with the pie chart shown nearer the origin in Figure 2. Results, as measured on the two axis, are relatively small.

Figure 2
Impact of Balanced Use of Eight-Part Model for Transformation
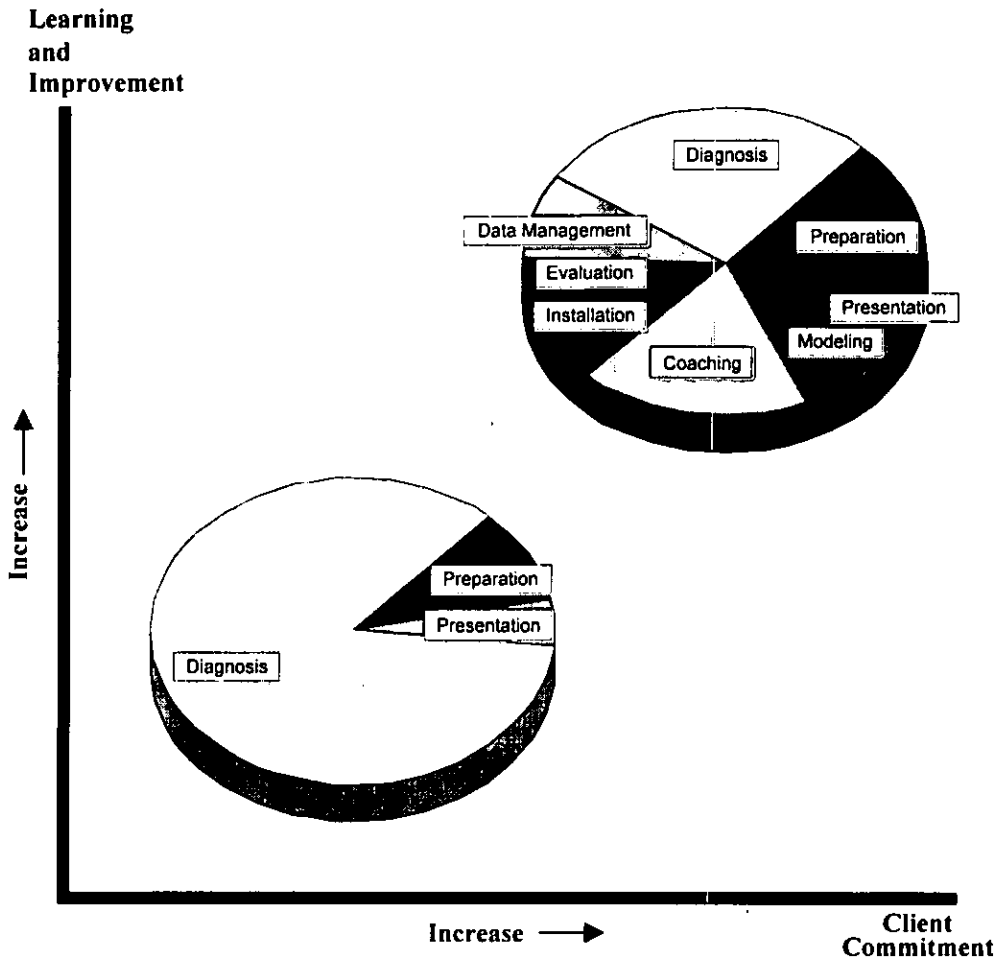
The owner hires the consultant to structure a consulting process that will lead to improvement. To induce improvements, the consultant must lead the engagement, collaborating with the owner, making balanced use of all eight parts of the model. Ideally, the consultant's example will achieve two objectives: (1) convince the business owner that improvements are necessary, and (2) help the business owner learn how to apply the eight-part model to his or her own staff. We depict the improved results with the pie chart shown further from the origin in Figure 2. Results, as measured on the two axis, are relatively large. Note that the two pie charts in Figure 2 are similar in size. We think that the consultant's time budget does not necessarily have to increase to achieve improved results. However, the consultant must definitely reallocate his/her time.

The first part of the model is **diagnosis**. Authors have written much on this topic. (For example, Ames, 1990, 1994; Blake & Mouton, 1983; Bruckman & Iman, 1980; Fuchs, 1975; Holtz, 1986;

Quay, 1994; Stryker, 1982) The consultant needs to understand what the business is supposed to do, and how it is supposed to work. What is a quality output for this business? How can one define a quality output? Who decides? Next, the consultant needs to collect data on the way the business is working. What goes wrong and how do people cope? Do employees know how to tell if quality is down? What can they do about it? Do their orders permit them to take corrective action? Next, given the owner's limited time and other resources, the consultant must prioritize improvement recommendations. Which options have the greatest potential to improve the business?

Once recommendations are clear, the consultant must get the owner to commit resources. A prerequisite for owner commitment is **preparation**. The consultant must prepare for successful installation of key recommendations. The consultant must prepare an action agenda covering the remaining elements of the eight-part model. Owner commitment begins with awareness. Once the action agenda is ready, the consultant **presents** the owner with *both* the recommendations and the action agenda.

Commitment comes into focus with training. After preparing the owner, the consultant must **model** the improvements. Modeling in a training context means showing the trainee how to do the job. Sometimes, the consultant can model improvements by doing the task a few times while the owner watches. On a larger scale, the consultant can walk the owner through the steps of a successful pilot study. Or, the consultant can show steps competitors or other "benchmark" companies use to succeed.

Commitment builds with practice. For best results, the consultant must **coach** the owner as the owner practices the improved techniques. This means being there to observe performance, correct mistakes, and praise improvement. Few coaches would set a game plan and then leave the team to practice and play the big game on its own. Too many consultants do.

Commitment pays off with **installation**. Installation makes the new method a seamless part of the whole. For example, the company must choreograph improvement with existing methods and work flow to achieve best results. Management must realign authority and accountability to assure smooth coordination. Channels of communication and data flow must change to reflect new realities. Even if not actively involved, consultants can contribute to installation and should monitor progress. During installation, the consultant's role is more than coaching one team. It is more analogous to helping managers improve the team's entire league. Consultants can help the participants keep the big picture in mind. Awareness of installation challenges and successes makes the consultant more valuable to the company.

The benefits of commitment culminate with **evaluation**. Every installation provides the opportunity to learn how to further improve targeted operations and the improvement process itself. Success or failure, the consultant and the participants can assess progress and pinpoint areas for advancement. They can take action to begin more cycles of organized improvement.

In Figure 1, we show **data management** as a separate task. It involves setting up a tracking and reporting subsystem. The subsystem draws information from the rest of the process. It contributes information useful to other transformation tasks. Effective data management helps both the consultant and the owner to keep all tasks on target and capture ideas for additional improvements.

We suggest consultants and owners, as change agents, use our eight-part improvement model iteratively. They should not view the parts as major phases of a long term project. Our experience with hundreds of consulting projects is that many small iterations or overlapping "work cycles" are necessary to accomplish big changes. Other successful consultants support this conclusion (Bruckman & Iman, 1980; Pierce, 1991; Van Voorhis, 1980, Wesner, 1995). We see three reasons for this. First, the person you are trying to change needs time to absorb and accept new data contrary to accepted practices. This person, who we will call the "associate," may be may be the owner, the owner's partners, a family members, or an employee. Involving the associate in early decisions, and regular feedback activities, avoids overwhelming him or her with threatening data, all at once, in your final presentation.

Flexibility is a second reason for preferring many small, overlapping work cycles. The consultant or owner can adjust the action agenda to fit the associate's reactions to early work. Empathy and adaptability by the consultant or owner help turn associate resistance into commitment.

Finally, a third reason many small iterations are necessary to accomplish big changes is that the associate will need practice. The associate must become skilled enough with new approaches to feel comfortable with his or her probability of success. Otherwise, the associate will revert to the "tried and true" at the first crisis.

To summarize this section, the owner's follow-up on consultants' recommendations relates directly to how good *both* the consultant and the owner are at organized improvement. Specifically, the likelihood of successful implementation increases with two factors: (1) the degree to which the consultant and the owner understand the eight-part improvement model, and (2) how practiced they are at its use. In this regard, we recommend the consultant walk the owner through several small improvement work cycles during the term of the engagement. Also, the consultant should help the owner walk his or her associates through improvement cycles. This will help assure that the owner will have the skills to follow-up on recommendations that take longer to install.

DIAGNOSIS WITHOUT "TREATMENT" IS PROBABLY USELESS

Unfortunately, many small business owners are not very good at organized improvement. Not realizing this fact, too many consultants spend most of their time diagnosing client "ills." They spend the rest of the time writing their final report and preparing Microsoft Powerpoint slides for the exit-interview presentation. The client is left to "treat" itself. In other words, most consultants do an acceptable job at diagnosis and report presentation. However, they assume too much, or too little, about the owner's desire and ability to follow up. For whatever reason, many consultants are not very good at organized improvement either. They need to spend more time on modeling, coaching, installation, evaluation and data management. They need to revise the time cycle of the engagement to balance diagnosis with treatment.

Thomas Faulhaber, an experienced consultant, points out that,

> The consultant's job is not so much to solve the problems as to teach people in the organization to do what is necessary. The consultant is a teacher, almost a father figure.

He has to establish camaraderie with employees, but there also has to be a little fear. Employees have to sense that this guy knows good from bad, that "maybe I can fool the boss, but . . ." [Coach]...may even be a better word [than teacher]. It's like the Pittsburgh Steelers – the strongest guy on the team is the coach. There are some pretty big guys around, but even the superstars don't go anywhere without a good coach." ("A Small Company," 1980, p. 84).

BEYOND DIAGNOSIS TO TREATMENT C AN ACTION AGENDA

How does one move beyond diagnosis to treatment? This section offers a practical example. An air-conditioning contractor was having problems with logistics. Final job costs always seemed to exceed initial estimates. For one-day jobs, costs soared when the right people and parts did not get to the right job site at the right time. For multi-day jobs, keeping costs down was still hard. The owner could not calculate if the job was within budget until long after the job was complete. The owner called in a consulting team.

The consulting team interviewed several successful contractors, researched accounting software, and recommended a popular package that includes job costing and inventory modules. The accounting package also includes an easy-to-use, customizable report feature. The owner purchased the package and the consultants set up the owner's business on the computer. The consultants then asked the owner to read the manual and make his staff use the software. The owner balked, claiming he and his people did not have enough time to convert from a manual system that "works pretty well."

When the consulting team "hit the wall" of owner resistance, they had to step back and develop an installation plan. They approached their supervisor for help. Their supervisor introduced them to the eight-part improvement model. He also gave them a generic Consultant's Action Agenda, covering necessary steps after diagnosis (Table 1). Using the Consultant's Action Agenda as a model, the consulting team quickly devised their own action agenda for the owner and key employees. They went back to the owner offering hands-on training. The owner accepted. Within four weeks, the new accounting system was in daily use.

Table 1
Consultant's Action Agenda

CONSULTANT'S ACTION AGENDA

HOW TO PREPARE

I. **Review Your Findings** -- go over each recommendation for improvement and prepare written activity assignments. Ask yourself,
    What does the recommendation involve?
    What activities need doing to complete the recommendation successfully?
    Why is this recommendation important to the enterprise?
    How will the enterprise win? (Be prepared to explain your answers to the owner)
    What is in this for those who must install the recommendation? (The owner, the owner's partners, family members, or employees, collectively called "associates")
    How will each associate win? (Be prepared to point out these benefits)

How does the new activity fit in with present activities assigned to each associate? What are the priorities for completion?

For each associate,

What is a quality result?

How will we measure quality?

How will data be collected?

What rewards will the owner give if associates successfully install the recommendation?

What corrective action should the owner take if installation problems occur?

II. **Consider the Person**. For each Associate, ask yourself,

What are his/her goals and needs?

How can you best communicate with this person?

What training does this person need to do the new activity right?

III. **Develop a Training Plan**. Fit the person into your timetable. Ask yourself,

Who needs training?

When will the training be done? (Set a schedule)

IV. **Prepare a Training Breakdown**. List important steps and key points you want to cover.

V. **Have Everything Ready**. Line up the equipment, tools and material you will need.

Will the person be writing a report? Obtain examples of previous reports.

Does the person need to know how to use a software program? Arrange to have a computer handy which is properly set up for the task.

Will the person be doing something without precedent? Have the schedule for progress reporting and final results with you.

VI. **Select the Location to Make the Assignment**. Minimize distractions and maximize job relevance.

Is the new activity physical? Then meet at the workplace.

Is the new activity a conceptual or creative task? Then meet in an area where the client displays past successes and/or awards won by others.

VII. **Select the Time to Make the Assignment**. Minimize distractions and avoid busy periods.

VIII. **Pull Together the Information That You Will Need**.

What information do you have that the associate should have to do the job right?

Information includes tips on how to get up to date data and names of people the associate should collaborate with.

HOW TO TRAIN

I. **Prepare the Associate**.

Put him/her at ease.

Overview what is involved in the new activity.

Find out what he or she already knows about it. Stimulate his/her interest in the new activity. Explain why the new activity is important. How will the enterprise win? How will the associate win personally?

Let your confidence and determination show. Make sure the associate understands that you really believe that he or she can do the new activity.

Make sure you have the associate's full attention.

II. **Present the Activity**.

Give the associate a copy of the written job assignment.

Go over the new activity: what needs to be done, the priorities, how the new activity fits in with existing tasks in the flow, who the associate should collaborate with, the tools to use, information available, success criterion, and report back requirements.

Tell, show, and illustrate the activity sequence -- no more than the associate can master in any one session. Stress key points. Be clear, thorough and patient.

Listen to the associate's comments and make changes on the written job assignment as necessary. Seek Consensus. Continue until you both agree it is a good assignment.

III. Model the Activity.

When possible show the associate how to successfully complete a job assignment. Walk them through it.

IV. Coach.

Have the associate tell you about the job assignment and show you how they will do it. Have the associate explain key points.

If possible, test working knowledge by having the associate do the activity. Correct errors. Repeat steps I through III as necessary. It may take several times. Praise improvement. Continue until you know he or she understands.

V. Install. Review progress with the owner. Ask the owner to:

1. **Transfer Authority**

    Give the associate the necessary authority to do the new activity.

    Give the associate appropriate latitude concerning how to reach success criterion.

    Empower the associate to suggest improvements for the step.

2. **Transfer Accountability.**

    Put the associate on his/her own.

    For activities within his or her control, let the associate know that he or she will be accountable for both the quality of results and quality of execution. Stress that quality is top priority.

    Also, make the associate accountable for assessing the overall quality of results and quality of execution. Make it clear the associate's job, besides the activity itself, is to help the owner help him/her do his/her best. The owner expects him/her to exhibit self-initiation in evaluation of progress and to suggest ways to continuously improve the activity being worked on.

3. **Arrange for Training.**

    If the associate needs further training, agree with the owner on what the training will be and when it will take place. The employee does not really have authority and accountability until fully trained.

    Even if the associate does not appear to need training, always have the owner designate to whom the associate should go for needed help.

4. **Announce the Assignment.**

    Once training is complete, have the owner let everyone know that the associate has both full authority, and the owner's full support, to do the new activity on their own.

    Introduce the people involved to each other. Make sure everyone understands that the associate is the one to deal with concerning this new activity assignment, not you.

5. **Put It on Record.** The written job assignment is the permanent record of the new activity assignment.

    Go over the written assignment with the associate to recap the assignment and insure agreement.

Make sure to include a list of who should receive progress reports and the dates recipients will need progress reports. Verify this list with the associate.

If you assign one person multiple tasks with the same due date, specify the order of priority and note this on the written assignment.

Make sure both the owner and the associate have legible copies of the written assignment.

VI. Evaluation

1. **Review**

    Follow-up on schedule. Have the owner collect progress reports and/or visit the work site to see progress. Make sure someone follows up and collects late progress reports.

    Read progress reports immediately. Have the owner set aside time to read reports upon receipt.

2. **Command Action.** This step involves giving feedback to the associate.

    Praise improvement and correct errors.

    Reteach if necessary.

    Give praise.

    Reward good performance.

    Do not assume unsatisfactory performance is the associate's fault.

    > Does the person know performance is unsatisfactory? Does the person know what is supposed to be done and when?
    >
    > Are there obstacles beyond the person's control?
    >
    > Does the person know how to do the activity?
    >
    > Does the person receive negative consequences when they do the activity right?
    >
    > Does the person receive positive consequences for nonperformance?
    >
    > Could the person do the job if he or she wanted to?

    The owner's answers to these questions will determine whether the owner must fix the "system," retrain the associate, or get someone else to do the new activity.

CONCLUSION

Lack of follow-up to consultant's recommendations is a common challenge. Analyzing why, we see that follow-up is a hands-on improvement process. Many small business owners are not very good at organized improvement. One implication for consultants is that a poorly prepared owner will gain little value from competent diagnosis alone. Another is that a professional exit-interview presentation will be insufficient to assure that an owner, inexperienced at organized improvement, will follow up on sound recommendations.

We conclude that, to turn consultant's recommendations into business improvement, consultants must take responsibility for following up. Consultants must develop an action agenda. They must guide the owner and the owner's associates through initial iterations of the business improvement process. Doing this will help the owner develop the commitment and skills necessary to tackle follow-up issues. It will increase the probability that the owner will take responsibility to follow up on the consultant's major recommendations. Also, if the client's associates learn how to improve the business in an organized way, they can help. The owner will

not have to do it alone, and will be more likely to follow up on sound recommendations. The company will be ready for future challenges.

This paper gives consultants and owners an eight-part model to help transform consultant's recommendations into business improvement. It incorporates the model into a Consultant's Action Agenda. Both owners and consultants can use this agenda to help turn recommendations into improvement. Consultants and owners alike will benefit from learning how to approach business improvement in an organized way.

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APPENDIX

INTRODUCTION

The previous article presents an eight-part model and action agenda for transforming consultant's recommendations into business improvement. It is a big challenge to apply the model and action agenda to student field case work. Are the results worth the effort for a student program?

Our Small Business Institute offers student consulting to local small businesses. Student teams have served several hundred clients. We have not used a systematic methodology to measure the effectiveness of alternative approaches to the student consulting task. However, our experience base is large enough to provide more than anecdotal evidence. In our experience, the SBI filed case approach, coupled with balanced use of the eight-part model, leads to higher levels of business improvement. It works for us to help student consultants use the eight-part model to improve small business in an organized way.

Like professional consultants, too many student consultants focus on diagnosis and presentation, assuming it is the owner's responsibility to implement. We believe this is usually insufficient to assure effective follow-up by clients. To induce improvements, the student consultant must lead the engagement, collaborating with the client, making balanced use of all eight parts of the model.

These ideas sound great, but what about application? How do you incorporate the eight-part model and action agenda into a field case work class -- especially if your school operates on the quarter system? No easy answers or quick fixes exist, but you can do it. This appendix gives eight recommendations to guide your thinking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use the model and action agenda yourself.

Let it guide the way you run your class. Lead by example.

2. Present the model.

Begin by sharing the eight-part model and action agenda with your students. Discuss the importance of improving in an organized way. Help the students understand how mastering the improvement process will contribute to their success --- in the class and in their careers. If the students know where to go, how much faster they get there will surprise you.

Further, give the students concise handouts that describe your favorite tools for accomplishing each step. For example, if you give students useful diagnostic tools, they will surprise you with how quickly they can compile useful findings for the client. For ideas on what to include in your handouts, we recommend the following sources:

Diagnostic interviewing: John Quay (1994), *Diagnostic Interviewing for Consultants and Auditors* Cincinnati, Ohio: Quay Associates. Bill Cunningham presented a professional development workshop, "Diagnostic Interviewing for Consultants," at SBIDA's 1998 National Small Business Consulting Conference. Cunningham has students use Quay's techniques. His E-mail address is cunningham@xec.com.

How to sort out what needs to be done to improve a company: Michael D. Ames (1994) Rethinking the Business Plan Paradigm: Bridging the Gap Between Plan and Plan Execution, *Journal of Small Business Strategy*, 5, 69-76. Ames has students systematically employ twelve tools to select and prioritize improvement tasks. His E-mail address is sbiames@fullerton.edu.

Project management: Pamela S. Schindler presented a professional development workshop, "Enhancing Project Management Within the Field-Case Consulting Format," at SBIDA's 1998 National Small Business Consulting Conference. Schindler has students use a planning system for improved case management. Her E-mail address is pschindler@mail.wittenberg.edu.

3. Model each of the eight steps every day.

Early in the term, use vignettes, role plays and analysis of text book cases to show students how to do each step. As work proceeds on field cases, point out how you might do the eight steps for specific client needs.

4. Coach.

Actively involve yourself in each step of the students' work. Attend the first interview with the client. Have the students submit progress reports and rough drafts of their work. Review and discuss each step with students until they are ready for the next level.

5. Install.

Transfer authority and accountability to students for specific tasks early in the term. The engagement letter the students prepare for the client is not enough. Set up internal project management controls. Have the students record specific work assignments. Monitor each student's progress weekly. If students need training to complete their tasks, have them develop training time tables and find necessary resources. The students walk the tight rope. You are the safety net.

Require the students to use the eight-part improvement model iteratively, rather than viewing the parts as major phases of a semester-long project. Follow the advice of Aesop's fable. During the first interview with the client, have the students look for "thorns" they can pull from the client's "paw." "Thorns" are client needs, demanding immediate attention, but easy to remedy. For big, complex needs, have the students begin dealing with them, piece by piece, as soon as they have sufficient data to experiment. Four benefits accrue from using many small iterations or overlapping "work cycles:" (1) Early in the term, students can practice using all parts of the improvement model and action agenda to benefit their client. They start with simple tasks that meet obvious needs. Successful solution builds student confidence and client rapport. (2) The client needs time to absorb and accept new data contrary to accepted practices. Involving the

client in early decisions, and regular feedback activities, avoids overwhelming the client with threatening data at the end of the semester. (3) Flexibility results from use of many small, overlapping work cycles. The student consultant can adjust the action agenda to fit the client's reactions to early work. Empathy and adaptability by the student consultant help turn client resistance into commitment. (4)The client will need practice. Using many small iterations allows everyone to become skilled enough with new approaches to feel comfortable with the process of organized improvement. Otherwise, clients will revert to the "tried and true" at the first crisis.

6. Evaluate continuously.

Don't wait until the end of the semester. Review each step of each iteration. Read progress reports immediately. Take prompt command action to correct errors and praise progress. Students get the message. They reduce procrastination and "slacking off." Frequent evaluations create a sense of urgency. Momentum builds. More success occurs in less time.

7. Less is more.

If your student teams spend most of the term doing comprehensive diagnosis of client "ills," clients will be left to "treat" themselves. The students will not get practice in using the other elements of the eight-part model. Clients will be less likely to follow up on the encyclopedia of recommendations your students present in the final report. Too much diagnosis reduces the practical value of the consulting process. Both the students and the client benefit less. Make the students prioritize clients' needs. Have them select improvement tasks they can follow all the way through – preparation, presentation, modeling, coaching, installation, and evaluation. Each step of the way, have them practice data management. Revise the time cycle of the engagement to balance diagnosis with treatment.

8. Remember you are the leader.

As Dr. Deming often said, the leader is responsible for working on the system to improve it. If your case class is not working, most of the time, *you* are responsible for the problems-- not the students and not the clients. If your system is not working, fix the problem not the blame. You have the power. Use it. Consider three examples. Example one: Do you find it difficult to get good results in a ten-week quarter? Perhaps you can set up a two-class sequence to give yourself more time. Do diagnosis and preparation in the first term. Implement key recommendations in the second term. Or perhaps, you can compress your available time. Set up a required "boot camp" workshop. Offer it for a full day in the first week of the quarter, in lieu of lectures later in the term. Example two: Do you find it difficult to lecture on your favorite topics while you supervise student field cases? Perhaps you can teach what you want to teach without lecturing. Use the case projects as a curricular motivational tool. Give them tips you consider important as they seek ways to benefit the client. Have the students dig into the textbook and other resources to find ways to use your tips. Link your examinations to skills you want the students to acquire during the engagements. Example three: Do your students fail to take the case projects seriously? Perhaps you can clarify the benefits. Make the learning opportunity clear. Show the links between work on the case and their personal success. Or, perhaps you can "raise the bar." Make the project grade a bigger part of the class grade. Focus individual accountability by requiring and grading individual work on the case throughout the term.