THE CONSULTANT AS INSIDER AND CHANGE AGENT: The Problem of Boundaries in Social Systems

Hans S. Falck

ABSTRACT: A consultant who is an “insider” must be sensitive to ethical and psychological issues in human systems that are of lesser import to “outside” consultants. Organizational boundaries are considered as being created by the norms required for membership in the system rather than from outside.

This article develops a conceptual approach to the problem of boundary in social system theory. It seems best to begin with a first section that relates a common difficulty, that is, the introduction of an outsider into an ongoing system in which he or she is expected to work as a full-time “inside” consultant and change agent. A variety of practical considerations occur in such an effort—in themselves worth some study. Yet, the theoretical issues associated with such efforts go well beyond that. They touch at one of the basic aspects in social systems theory. This is the very concept of system from the standpoint of systems delineation and definition, that is, “where it begins and where it ends and what one finds in between.”

Part I is devoted to introduction of the consultant in a preexisting system; Part II discusses and elaborates on the broader conceptual issues called boundary.

PART I

Consultants are outsiders.

With this categorical statement in mind, this article describes and discusses the functions of the opposite—the inside consultant who is an...
employee of the organization in which he or she works and whose job it is to bring about change.

_The inside consultant is atypical because he or she offers a service characteristically given by outsiders._

The inside consultant, when viewed against the background of consultation in general, is a somewhat anomalous entity. He or she is atypical mostly because consultation in the human services is characteristically offered by outsiders—those not part of the administrative or clinical line staff. Social agencies bring in psychiatrists; hospitals import researchers; businesses employ management specialists as consultants; government contracts for social scientist or other scientist consultant services. Always in such cases, the consultant belongs to some other organization (including his or her own), and works on a time-limited basis and under contract. Not so the inside consultant.

One may make several quick observations to describe whom I have in mind: consultants are employees of the organization in which they consult; they do not have the “protections” of the outsider who comes in as expert and leaves; they must essentially support the norms of the organization in which they are consultants and also colleagues; they are faced with the issues attending the authority dimensions of the consultant role—as much placed on them by the consultees as inherent in the consultant role; they must be able to critique parts of the organization's work while contributing to its stability in the service of, among other things, their self-interests in having a secure place in which to do their work. They must learn to manage their own anxieties that are the product of a role that has a place in the organization but with variations that are somewhat atypical when compared to others.

This article makes as explicit as possible the role of the inside or in-residence consultant. Before embarking on a more detailed examination of the issues surrounding him or her, it is necessary to delineate the traditional consultant role. This is followed making explicit the problems and characteristics that attend the proper functioning of the in-residence consultant. The latter is viewed from the standpoint of the dilemmas and role conflicts that almost by definition are inherent in the work of someone who is a member of the organization and at the same time its consultant.

Since the author's consultation work is mostly in mental health settings, the discussion centers around clinics, hospitals, and related services. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from recognizing that we are speaking of consultation or organizations, of which these are special cases.