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# ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

*Purposeful Consulting*

Peter Stroh



*The complexity and uncertainty of the modern world are making new demands on organization managers. Purposeful consulting teaches managers to take control and create the future they desire.*

# Purposeful Consulting

Peter Stroh

All good consulting is based on a desire to help clients achieve their goals. Essential to empowering clients are the beliefs that ultimate responsibility for client success rests with the client, and that the likelihood of success increases when the client makes free and informed commitments based on valid data. All good consulting emphasizes the importance of building trust with the client, frequently as a collaborator, to help in this process. Finally, good consulting values the goals of the consultant as well as those of the client. In order to serve the client effectively, the consultant must be able to accomplish certain of his or her own results as well in the process.

The rise of uncertainty and interdependency in all sectors of society affects consultants and clients alike. Notwithstanding the premises above, which still hold true, the methods of successful consulting are changing. New approaches must take future uncertainty and present complexity into account. The purpose of this article is to point the way toward an organization-consulting

approach that better meets the demands of our time.

Traditional consulting is motivated by managers' desires to solve problems. Competition, declining sales, low productivity, tight time frames for product innovation, poor quality or service, high stress, and low morale are among the most difficult problems managers now face. The usual responses by consultants to managers' requests have been either to analyze the problem and present solutions (the expert approach honed by McKinsey and Company) or to structure a collaborative problem-solving process to help clients arrive at their own solutions (excellently described by Peter Block).

Both approaches remain in heavy demand, but neither fully satisfies the client. Like the mythological hydra that grows two heads for every one cut off, the solutions we develop are often rapidly overwhelmed by a plethora of new problems. The client gets closer to the customer only to have the market disappear, becomes more fiscally respon-

sible at the expense of creativity, and grows more creative at the expense of timely product introductions. Many managers feel that they are running faster and working harder than ever before, and not getting results that match their efforts. Can managers increase their effectiveness with the same or less effort than in the past? Can consultants devise and deliver an approach that enables clients to achieve this result?

A martial arts exercise points to the answer. (I am indebted to Innovation Associates for introducing this exercise to organizations.) An individual is asked to resist having his or her arm bent by another person of greater or equal strength. Under these directions the arm can usually be bent. The individual is then requested to imagine his or her arm as a steel rod before the other person tries to bend it. The arm almost always remains straight on the second attempt, despite the increased effort of the other person, and even the assistance of a third person, to bend it. Moreover, the individual now reports greater ease in keeping his or her arm straight.

Better results. Less effort. The key lies in what the individual trying to keep the arm straight focuses on. In the second case, he or she focuses on the desired result (the steel rod being a symbolic image of a straight arm). In the first case, the individual is trying to achieve contradictory aims: keeping his or her arm straight *and* resisting having it bent. This focus actually reduces the individual's effectiveness because it is based on a hidden belief that the arm can indeed be bent (otherwise, why try to resist?).

#### LEARNING TO FOCUS ON RESULTS

Focus on the result. This is one of the basic tenets of management practice. So why isn't it working? In part, the principle doesn't work because in practice managers and consultants don't follow it. They focus on problems, not

on results. They are like people who resist having an arm bent because they fear that it will be. Moreover, the results we once envisioned, framed in a clear picture of the future drawn from sound forecasts, have become increasingly unpredictable. Less able to focus on what we think will happen, our best alternative is to consider what we want to create.

Focus on what you truly want to create. This is the basis for effective managing and consulting in today's world. The recent emphasis on organization purpose, vision, and mission follows this new direction. It accomplishes three important results. *First*, when people focus on what they really want, they tend to relax preconceived limitations and achieve more than they think is possible. As an example, Fred Jervis, founder of the Center for Constructive Change, related the case of two luxury hotels, serving the same market, that wanted to improve their repeat business, which was 5%. He asked the managers of one hotel to choose a goal that seemed realistic for the problem at hand. They indicated that a 7% return rate would be a realistic increase and subsequently achieved that rate. He asked the managers of the other hotel to set an ideal return rate goal; they envisioned a 55% return rate and subsequently achieved 42%!

*Second*, purpose and vision enable an organization to develop a long-term perspective within which to determine and realize short-term goals. For example, a small pharmaceutical company had successfully introduced a new product, only to be forced to sell the product to a larger competitor when falling prices preempted it from marketing the product directly. From a short-term perspective, the management team members believed they had failed to achieve their goal of marketing a new product. But after they clarified for themselves their larger purpose—profitably contributing to people's health—they realized they had succeeded. They had profitably leveraged a larger company to get



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the result for them. In another situation we know too well, the Japanese have achieved remarkable long-term gains in U.S. markets by being willing to absorb short-term losses.

*Third*, a focus on purpose and vision provides meaning and renews motivation. In a comprehensive study of changing American values, Daniel Yankelovich reports a grassroots shift from an "instrumental" to a "sacred" world view, that is, to one in which striving for higher ideals is very important. Companies have the potential to capitalize on this shift by identifying and addressing purposes that embody employees' strivings for excellence, creativity, and service. In addition

to providing the basis for a strong organization culture and strategy, a worthy organizational purpose inspires people beyond the ups and downs of daily existence (Exhibit 1).

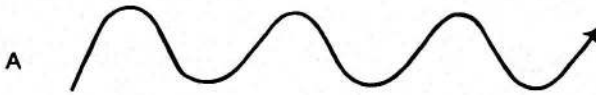
But what about the problems? "We still have to solve the problems," you might say. Indeed, as a consultant, you are called in and paid to solve organization problems. There is no need to worry: Along the way toward achieving a purpose, there are plenty of problems to solve. The point is to solve them in a new context. Frequently, problems can be reframed to become just one part of the current situation when other, equally important elements include what is positive about the present and what has worked in the past. Sometimes, the initial problem is expanded to incorporate all the problems to which it is connected. Such an analysis can illuminate the root cause of an identified problem and lead to a qualitative systemwide improvement in performance. At other times, the problem simply disappears because it becomes insignificant in light of what people truly want to create. For example, questions about how to deal with poor-quality products tend to disappear after a company becomes committed to 100% product quality.

The remainder of this article outlines the basic steps of what we shall call purposeful consulting. It presents not only the step-by-step activities included in the process, but also the assumptions and goals that underlie the approach. Purposeful consulting is contrasted with the more common problem-solving approach to clarify further the differences between them, and, finally, lest this new approach appear too finite and mechanical, a final section indicates the art involved in executing it.

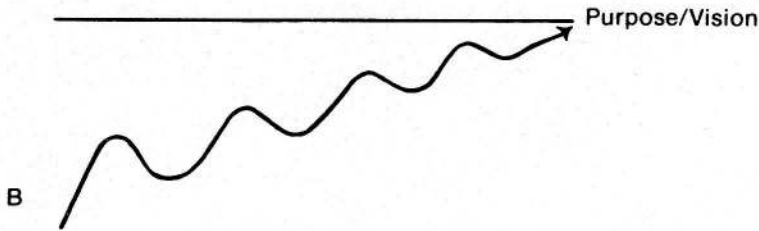
#### THE FOUNDATION OF PURPOSEFUL CONSULTING

The basic structure of purposeful consulting is based on Robert Fritz's concept of creative





Achieving goals or solving problems without purpose (A) frequently produces elation (crests) followed by depression (troughs) until the next goal is identified and reached or the next problem is defined and solved.



Accomplishing goals or solving problems within the context of realizing a higher purpose (B) is less subject to emotional fluctuation. Each accomplishment or solution provides greater fulfillment from further realization of the purpose.

tension. The consultant establishes a tension between the client's actual situation (current reality) and what the client wants to create (vision). This tension naturally seeks resolution and provides vital energy for the creative process. It will be resolved in favor of the vision as long as the client (1) deeply wants to reach and persists in holding the vision, (2) sees the vision as if it were happening right now, (3) clearly understands current reality, and (4) accepts the discomfort (emotional tension) that may arise if the gulf between the vision and reality is difficult to bridge. The consultant's job is to ensure that these conditions are met. This involves helping the client not only to clarify his or her understanding of the present and vision of the desired future, but also to bridge the gap between them. In other words, purposeful consulting places the present in opposition to a desired future. Traditional consulting, by contrast, derives

goals for the future from an undesirable present situation.

Several assumptions support a consultant in effectively applying this structure. First, the consultant assumes that the client is whole and healthy, and views the consulting work as a process of enabling the client to recognize that he or she is whole. Wholeness is defined here as the actualization of one's full potential. Clients perceived in this way appreciate the consultant's belief in them and tend to live up to it. Clients' problems frequently stem from their beliefs that they are not whole. In such a case, short-term solutions to specific problems do not alter their basic self-image, and new problems continue to develop.

A related assumption of purposeful consulting is that the organization is a vehicle for reaching a worthwhile purpose. Instead of simply providing a means of attaining eco-

nomic and social rewards, organizations exist to enable clients to accomplish noble ends they could not achieve individually. When they learn to view the organization this way, clients begin to imbue their work with meaning and energy, and to challenge themselves consciously to strive for excellence, creativity, and the highest quality of service possible.

A third assumption is that people must be aligned around a purpose if they are to achieve it. This alignment is first personal and subsequently organizational. At the individual level, people must become aware of what they truly care about and want to create. The commitment to act on this awareness is the basis for personal motivation and the source of effective leadership. People then commit themselves to the organization when they see that what the organization stands for collectively, they stand for individually. Furthermore, clarity about what the organization stands for (its purpose) makes it an effective competitor (contributor) in the environment. The story of Apple Computer illustrates the various levels of alignment required for success. Steve Jobs's vision of the value of personal computers sparked the growth of a company peopled by employees intensely committed to the same vision. Jobs's subsequent refinement of the vision to distinguish home and educational applications severely threatened the future of the company. Efforts to eliminate this distinction (including, in this case, the departure of Jobs) have helped restore Apple's competitive edge.

A fourth assumption is that achieving an organizational purpose requires valid data. The organization must be clear about both what it wants to create and what its current condition is. Although such assessments evolve over time, clients must be keenly aware at any point in time of both the present and desired future states. The continuous

contrast between these images provides the creative tension vital to success. Many clients understand their current situation but are unsure about a vision for the future (a common problem in business organizations). Others know what they want but misunderstand or deny their present circumstances (a stumbling block in many volunteer organizations). Still others fail to appreciate either state.

A fifth assumption is that effective implementation (bridging the gap between vision and current reality) requires sound organization design. The structure of an organization must enable people effectively to translate their energies into collective results. The various components of the structure (e.g., goals and rewards) must be internally consistent and congruent with the purpose of the organization. It must function as an integrated whole. Most organizations do not exhibit such unity, because their elements have been developed independently by various experts in response to different demands over time. Consequently, comprehensive organization redesign is a critical component in the consulting process.

A sixth assumption is that effective implementation requires individuals who are capable of achieving the results they seek with an economy of effort. This involves talent, training to develop that talent, job-related challenges to exercise it, and the freedom to make mistakes within given parameters. An effective organization design also stimulates personal achievement.

A final assumption is that achieving a purpose requires learning and renewal. Although purpose is a powerful orienting and motivating force, it usually takes time to apprehend fully. Recognizing what one wants, learning to work toward it, testing to see if what one has accomplished is what one truly wants, and identifying deeper wishes are all

part of an ongoing process. The process is empowering because clients experience the process of shaping their own destinies. It is creative because it produces results. It is also gradual because, as one philosopher noted, "time exists so that not everything happens at once."

#### TRADITIONAL AND PURPOSEFUL CONSULTING: TWO ROADS TOWARD CHANGE

To help us compare purposeful and traditional consulting, let us examine some differences in the assumptions underlying the two approaches. Both approaches require valid data. But because the traditional consultant concentrates on solving specific problems, he or she defines valid data primarily as what is happening in the organization right now, with an emphasis on what isn't working. The purposeful consultant expands the meaning of valid data to include what is working now and, more important, what is desired for the future. Similarly, both consultants recognize that effective implementation requires internal commitment. In traditional consulting, internal commitment is assumed to come primarily from reducing people's resistance to change. By contrast, purposeful consulting seeks to fuel the desire for change (by developing organizational and personal commitment to a purpose), as well as to reduce the resistance to change.

Purposeful consulting also expands the affective or feeling states addressed. A renewed emphasis is placed on the clients' responsibility (hence power) to create what they truly want. This extends the traditional responsibility clients are assumed to have for their existing problems. Purposeful consulting focuses on the clients' inner nature (their unique character and value to society), rather than on simply their feelings. Emotional states (typically negative ones such as fear, discom-

fort, apathy, and anger) are still treated as valid data. However, they are more useful in helping clients let go of an old situation than in creating a new one. The creative process can be filled with temporary setbacks that are best met by acknowledging but not surrendering to the frustration they evoke.

Finally, personal consulting further empowers consultants themselves by stimulating them to clarify their own higher purposes or visions. As they expand their own definitions of excellence or service, consultants are able to assist their clients in ways they might not have risked or considered otherwise.

The goals of purposeful consulting are also different in important ways from those of traditional consulting. One major goal of purposeful consulting is enabling clients to take the first step toward reaching their purpose. This usually includes but goes beyond the traditional intention of helping clients solve existing problems or achieve stated goals. The purposeful approach establishes a longer-term perspective and a more meaningful (hence stronger) foundation for action (see Exhibit 1). Another goal is to help clients learn to work toward their purpose over time. This means teaching them about the creative process through the consulting relationship.

The purposeful consultant is a coach, a co-navigator, and a practical idealist. He or she acts as a coach by understanding the creative process and structuring approaches that help clients learn this process. The consultant is a co-navigator in choosing to make the client's vision part of his or her own, and collaborating with the client to achieve it. Finally, he or she is what Gandhi called a "practical idealist." The purposeful consultant encourages clients first to distinguish between what they want and what they think is possible, and then to focus on what they want without ever losing sight of what

Exhibit 2

CONTRASTING FOUNDATIONS OF PURPOSEFUL AND TRADITIONAL CONSULTING

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Purposeful Consulting

Traditional Consulting

*Assumptions*

The client is whole and well.

Organizations are a vehicle for achieving human purpose.

Alignment around what people truly want is an important condition for internal commitment.

Achieving a purpose requires valid data about the purpose or vision and current reality. Understanding goals and problems is necessary but not sufficient.

Both organization design and personal development are critical to organization success.

Achieving a purpose requires learning and renewal.

There is something wrong with the client.

Organizations exist to provide economic and social rewards.

Internal commitment is developed by reducing resistance to what people do not want.

Problem solving requires valid data about the nature and cause of the problem.

The management and development of individuals is critical to organization success.

Learning is desirable but not essential.

*Affective Areas Addressed*

Client responsibility for creating a desired future.

The client's essential nature is valid data.

The consultant should realize his/her own higher purpose in working with clients.

Client responsibility for problems and solutions.

Client's feelings are valid data.

The consultant's professional needs are legitimate.

*Goals*

Enable clients to take the next step in achieving their purpose.

Enable clients to manifest their purpose over time.

Attend to technical/business problems as well as interpersonal problems.

*Roles*

Coach  
Co-navigator  
Practical idealist

Expert  
Pair of hands  
Professional pragmatist



is. An analogy is that of the sculptor, who first sees the finished beauty in a rough piece of clay and then helps uncover it.

Some of the important contrasts in the foundations of purposeful and traditional consulting are summarized in Exhibit 2.

#### THE BASIC STEPS

As might be expected, traditional and purposeful consulting take different steps to reach their goals. (See Exhibit 3 for a summary of both.)

##### *Entry and Contracting*

Both consultants begin their work with entry and contracting. Building a relationship with the client is the first step in any consulting project, and most projects proceed with the client's presentation of a problem. When the consultant takes the initiative to offer his or her services, he or she may describe typical consulting approaches and describe past successful assignments before addressing the client's problem. Both consultants next communicate an understanding of the problem by relating it back concisely to the client, and acknowledge the client's difficulty in depending on outside help to solve it. At this point, the two consulting approaches diverge.

Early in the purposeful consulting process, the consultant relates the identified problem to the client's larger purpose and current capacity to manifest that purpose. Important questions in this regard are, "What is working right now?" "What are your strengths?" "What is your vision of the future?" and "What will the organization look and feel like when you have achieved what you want?" Even brief answers at this early point begin to establish the creative tension that is the basis of the approach. They also convey the consul-

#### Exhibit 3

##### THE BASIC STEPS IN PURPOSEFUL AND TRADITIONAL CONSULTING

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###### *Purposeful*

Entry and Contracting  
Reframing  
Aligning Around Purpose and Vision  
Clarifying Current Reality  
Organization Design and Transition Planning  
Implementation  
Learning and Renewal

###### *Traditional*

Entry and Contracting  
Data Collection  
Diagnosis  
Feedback  
Action Planning  
Implementation  
Evaluation and Decision to Continue

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tant's affirmation that the client is whole, and that the client is doing as well as possible with what he or she knows at the time.

Juanita Brown, a respected consultant who has used both approaches, suggests explaining the two types of consulting to the client and letting him or her select one or the other. She first asks potential clients to imagine working with a consultant who believes in their wholeness (without denying the existing problem). She then asks them to imagine working with a consultant who sees them as incomplete, with problematic holes that solutions might fill. When most prospective clients consider the distinction they opt for the purposeful approach.

If clients decide to work within this creative structure, the consultant can suggest more specifically how they might proceed. Clients are still likely to have some doubts about their level of commitment to a higher purpose or fears that they will lose control in the consulting process. The very nature of the

purposeful approach can inspire both greater confidence ("Someone really believes in me!") and doubt ("Do I really believe in myself?"). The consultant must respect both reactions and help to air and suspend clients' concerns. Then the work can proceed.

### *Reframing*

The next step in purposeful consulting is to reframe the existing situation as an opportunity to create rather than as a problem. This typically involves bringing together a larger group of stakeholders in the project. Participants might include key resource people and members of a steering committee for managing the work.

Reframing essentially means seeing things differently; the topic of reframing itself is one of the key areas examined. Innovation Associates, the first well-known management consulting firm to use the purposeful approach, uses the Greek word *metanoia* to emphasize the importance of reframing. *Metanoia* means "a fundamental shift of mind." The shift that takes place in a metanoic organization is one in which people adopt the belief that "they can create the future and shape their own destiny" (Charles Kiefer and Peter Senge, in *Metanoic Organizations: Experiments in Organizational Innovation*, Innovation Associates, Inc., 1982). The strategy of a metanoic organization is thus to articulate the vision of a desired future and to use internal resources and tendencies in the environment to realize this vision. By contrast, most organizations continue to believe that they are victims of forces largely beyond their control. The best they feel they can do is to predict an increasingly uncertain future and try to position themselves accordingly. In practice, many simply cope with existing problems to prevent current circumstances from becoming worse.

One of the major premises of purposeful consulting is that what one holds in one's consciousness tends to manifest itself. Personal beliefs and perceptions influence the reality one experiences; in other words, "Life is what you make it." It is not important to believe the statement is true in order for it to be effective. Like a working model in science, if one acts *as if* it were true, and subsequently becomes more effective and satisfied, it is a useful assumption to retain.

In fact, one's beliefs create reality—and reality, in turn, reinforces one's beliefs. If one believes someone is capable, one will tend to treat that person in such a way that he or she acts capably, thereby reinforcing the belief. If a company does not believe it can be competitive in a certain area, it will devote few resources to the area, thereby ensuring that it will not be competitive. Again, the original belief is proven.

The notion that belief determines reality is emphasized because one has control over what one believes or assumes to be true. Hence the importance of reframing. Asking "Do people's beliefs support what they want to create?" is a powerful question. If the answer is "No," one can adopt beliefs that are more supportive. By contrast, the more typical question, "Are people's beliefs true or not?" is not very powerful. One can always prove one's beliefs to be true based on past experience. As an example, many surveys have very little impact on organizational change because the questions asked and information produced tend to be limited by what people assume to be true in the first place.

The power of suspending and testing beliefs is a crucial part of organization learning in the purposeful consultation process. For example, Bill Veltrop and Karen Harrington ask clients to clarify and test their own working theories of how organizations work as a first step in a comprehensive ap-

proach to organization redesign and revitalization. They describe "learning how to learn" as the ongoing process of developing hypotheses before taking action, comparing predicted and actual results, and revising hypotheses to account for the differences in outcomes. This process serves as the basis for developing the knowledge and skills of organization leaders and resource people.

Robert Fritz's model of the creative process distills learning down to two even more basic steps: Create and adjust. To create means to formulate a desired result and take action to achieve it. To adjust means to compare the initial result to the desired result and refocus on the desired result. In both of these models, the driving force is provided by such simple key questions as "What do we really want?" and "Where are we now?" In fact, part of reframing is placing high value on asking questions. Unlike traditional consulting, which emphasizes answers or solutions, purposeful consulting recognizes that most solutions are temporal. It assumes that clients receive lasting benefit when they acquire the habit of asking key questions that produce relevant answers with regard to changing conditions.

Another objective of reframing is to teach clients to think systemically. Peter

Senge notes that we tend to think in terms of parts rather than wholes. Our entire educational system teaches us to analyze individual problems, with the assumption that mastering individual elements of a system will lead to mastery of the whole. Accordingly, at most organizations MIS experts design information systems, financial experts design accounting systems, and human resources experts design human resources systems. These systems are then brought together and attempts are made to coordinate them, but this approach rarely works well.

Drawing on Jay Forrester's pioneering work in System Dynamics at MIT, Senge points out that the source of an organization's success is the *interrelationship* between the parts, not the parts themselves. For example, the best compensation system is only as fair as the distribution of resources that enables people to apply their talents, as motivating as the intrinsic rewards (such as job interest) that stimulate people to contribute discretionary effort, and as effective as the goals to which they are tied. Moreover, the interrelationships in a complex system are not the same as those of the simple cause-effect relationships described by traditional analysis. For example, a company might experience declining sales because limited production ca-

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capacity produces delays that drive away customers. In this case, increasing production capacity rather than directly boosting sales effectiveness would be the better alternative. Such solutions are typical in complex systems: They tend to be far removed from the immediate problem symptoms (symptoms in sales, cause in manufacturing), and they operate in opposition to the symptom (if sales decline, then production capacity needs to increase).

While many managers instinctively know that such interdependencies are critical to their company's success, few have the organizational support or the rational tools to back up their instincts. One aim of purposeful consulting is to legitimize and provide analytic tools for a total systems approach. System Dynamics education in organizations provides such a resource.

Veltrop and Harrington use another systems approach. They ask clients to restate their initial concerns in the form of a four-box systems model that includes environmental factors, design elements, organization qualities, and desired outcomes. The four-box model provides a conceptual framework that helps managers see that problems they perceive as separate are in fact connected within an overall systems context. The framework supports diagnostic, design, and planning work that is integrated and comprehensive from the outset.

The final objective of reframing is to help clients reconsider the role of leaders in the organization. Traditionally, a leader is a person in charge of coming up with the right answer and executing it. Many people find it reassuring to think that someone else has "the answer"; others believe they themselves have it, and take control. Such assumptions, however, are inappropriate in modern organizations, which face growing uncertainties and complexities. CEOs frequently benefit from

the realization that there is not one answer that it is their unique responsibility to discover.

A more appropriate perspective is to view leadership as a set of functions distributed throughout the organization. These functions should be performed by the formal organization leaders and reinforced at all levels. These responsibilities include (1) clarifying and communicating a vision to which one is wholeheartedly committed, (2) aligning people throughout the organization around a common direction, (3) empowering oneself and others, and (4) thinking systemically to achieve sound organization design.

#### *Aligning Around Purpose and Vision*

After identifying the initial problem and reframing the existing situation to support creative action, the next step for the purposeful consultant is to help the organization focus more consciously on what it wants to achieve.

First, we must distinguish between the organization's mission and its vision. Both illuminate the organization's underlying purpose and should be identified. The mission statement expresses an ongoing direction or reason for being and is the basis for key decision making. It is typically one brief written statement that describes the organization's business focus and social values. The vision is a picture of what the organization will look like when the organization has achieved its mission. In the early stages of consulting, the vision is likely to be less clear than the mission statement. It may be verbal and/or symbolic, one- or multi-dimensional, concrete or abstract. The principal value of a vision at this point is to free people up to share what they really want, to acknowledge the motivation of higher human values, and to make the future palpable and real.



It is also important for consultants to help clients reflect individually on their personal visions. The clearer people are about what they want in all areas of their lives, the more fully they can commit themselves to the organization as one place to achieve their visions. In the words of Max DePree, president of Herman Miller, as this commitment is made the relationship between the individual and the organization shifts from being merely "contractual," a legalistic and formal exchange of work for money, to "covenantal." The covenant is based on "shared commitments to ideals, values, and goals." It is the basis for alignment, for people to see that what the organization stands for collectively, they stand for individually. Alignment is achievable because most people share the same deeply held values, but for it to be reached, people must be willing to express and commit themselves to these values. Only then can alignment be created and produce high levels of cooperation and teamwork.

The formal leader's vision is an important catalyst in the alignment process. This vision usually establishes the boundaries within which the visions of other employees develop. These multiple visions clarify, strengthen, and can fruitfully extend the

original vision. Each individual, and the organization as a whole, benefit when employees strive to realize their visions through the organization. On the rare occasion that one employee's vision is in irreconcilable conflict with those of the others, it may be in the best interests of the employee and the organization for him or her to leave. This option, too, is treated within the context of encouraging people to create what they want.

Alignment around a common purpose can be achieved in several ways. Initial statements of purpose and vision can be generated from top management, employees at lower levels in the organization, or representatives of employees at all organization levels. These statements are then reviewed and possibly modified by employees not involved in the initial direction-setting process. In one common procedure, the top management team is first aligned around a common purpose and generates a statement of the purpose. Responses to the statement are then given by representatives of all employees. Top management reviews the responses and accepts, modifies, or rejects the suggestions. The revised statement, with accompanying rationale, is then presented to all employees, and their feedback is incorporated

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into final changes. Finally, in a sign-up process, all employees are asked to understand and commit themselves to the organization's vision and mission.

In order to be effective, any means of achieving alignment must help all employees clarify what the organization's purpose means to them personally and must support their free choice in committing themselves to it. The purpose should be reviewed every one to two years to renew its strength and meaning.

### *Clarifying Current Reality*

In order to reestablish creative tension, the next step in purposeful consulting is to lead the organization to a deeper understanding of its current situation. This step builds on reframing, as the initial problem is considered in a new light.

The corresponding step in traditional consulting is diagnosis. Peter Block emphasizes helping clients expand their definition of the problem beyond its typical technical or business dimension. They are also encouraged to consider the organizational relationships that have kept the problem in place, and their own personal responsibility in creating the problem. For example, an engineering manager presents the initial business problem of difficulty in developing a new product on time and within his budget. An underlying organizational problem might be the tendency for engineers to get pulled away from product development to solve service problems on existing products. This might be compounded by the engineering manager's discomfort in confronting the new product and customer service managers on their inability to work together.

Purposeful consulting also helps clients understand problems at a deeper than ordinary level. At the same time, it overcomes the limits of traditional diagnosis. It aims to

help clients achieve lasting high performance and satisfaction, not just cope with an endless series of immediate problems. It distracts people from belaboring the obvious as they try to reinforce old beliefs. It moves them more quickly from arguing about what is wrong to taking action on what they want.

Clarifying current reality is thus a more comprehensive process than traditional diagnosis. It establishes how close clients are now to achieving their visions. This includes recognizing strengths (similarities between the present and desired states) as well as problems (differences between the two states). Beliefs about what is happening also are examined as part of current reality and as they relate to the future. For example, does the belief that something is wrong help the organization create what it wants? Can the perspective that a crisis is really an opportunity be adopted to better advantage?

The past can also be a useful source of information about the present. For example, existing strengths are frequently based on past successes, which can be reinforced if they contribute to the desired future. Other past successes (such as a large bank-teller network) might need to be honored and abandoned to accommodate a more automated world. Even when such a system is eliminated, the tradition of customer service it represents can be respected and upheld. In this vein, System Dynamics traces the historical trend lines of key variables in the organization to help clarify critical feedback relationships that might reinforce or limit growth in non-obvious ways.

Surveys can help respondents assess how close they are to achieving what they want. For example, Hans Mathiesen, Jr. has devised an instrument that asks employees to scale items with respect to their current levels, their desired levels, *and* how important the items are to them. The approach helps distinguish between items that exhibit a large gap

but little felt need to change (perhaps the formal compensation structure) and those with smaller gaps but higher perceived importance (e.g., the distribution of perks).

#### *Organization Design and Transition Planning*

The next step in purposeful consulting involves organization design and transition planning. In this step, the desired future and the current reality are defined in more precise terms, and plans are developed to close the gap between them.

Richard Beckhard and Reuben Harris developed transition planning to help organizations implement major systems changes while managing existing operations. The process begins when the client writes a clear, concise scenario for an ideal end state that is measurable. The scenario for a new manufacturing facility might include such items as "six production lines are operating, with five people per line" and "supplies are ordered by computer from the warehouse." Next, a scenario is written for the midpoint in the implementation. This is described in equally specific terms, including a target date. These

two scenarios serve as focal points for action planning.

Veltrop and Harrington guide clients through a more detailed and comprehensive design of their ideal organization. A major benefit of their approach is that it teaches organizations to design themselves continually rather than rely on the one "ideal" structure that may become outmoded as times change. Clients begin by designing the core operating subsystem, and adding support, managing, and strategic subsystems to reinforce it. The basic structure is then augmented with systems designed for managing information and decision making, human resources, rewards, and renewal. All systems are designed to fit with each other in support of the comprehensive vision.

Don Swartz asks clients to write clear descriptions of their expectations for each unit or position at the end of the change period and, if the roles will be different, at interim periods as well. Specific job descriptions for these periods are also written to help employees plan to meet their own career goals.

A more detailed assessment of current reality also considers several dimensions. Beckhard and Harris help clients examine the political reality of the organization by determining how ready to change and how accessible key stakeholders are. William Bridges suggests preparing an environmental-impact report to identify and address the psychological losses likely to be incurred by employees when major changes occur.

With the appropriate people assembled in one room, a systemic, rather than a personal, assessment of reality can then be conducted. Such understanding is critical because it directs people to influence a limited number of organizational leverage points from which small changes generate a ripple effect that produces systemwide improvement. These points typically have a greater

influence on organizationwide effectiveness than does the performance of any one individual. They might include holding a goal constant rather than letting it erode, or ensuring that alignment is maintained as new employees are added to a rapidly growing company.

A final dimension of current reality that is assessed is the organization's estimate of what will happen in the external environment in the future. Such a forecast is a statement of a *predicted* rather than a *desired* future. Unlike traditional consulting, in which the client plans for the forecast future, purposeful consulting guides the client toward the desired future. The predicted future, like the current reality, is treated as information the organization can use to achieve its purpose, rather than as a statement of what it ultimately aims for.

Several types of planning are needed to bridge the gap between the current and desired states. Strategic plans determine the critical results that the organization must accomplish to ensure its success or survival. Ideally, these results can be generated from leverage points identified in the system. Tactical plans detail the steps necessary to execute the strategic plans.

Beckhard and Harris emphasize the importance of planning how to gain the commitment of key stakeholders in the change process, and of planning how to structure the temporary organization responsible for managing the transition. Bridges and Swartz recommend that distinct plans be developed for communicating the transition to the entire organization to maximize people's support and minimize their anxiety.

### *Implementation*

Purposeful consultants provide managers with valuable coaching on implementation. Tom Peters says that excellent organizations

succeed by doing "1,000 things 1% better," and it is the consultant's challenge to recommend the few areas in which coaching matters most.

Maintaining creative tension requires two critical activities: continuing to focus attention on the organization's vision, and honestly assessing current reality.

One important method of focusing on results is time management. Successful executives limit the number of key results they strive to achieve and spend most of their time focused on achieving them. They delegate specific tasks in accordance with the particular interests and strengths of their direct reports (again to facilitate focus), and also ensure that everything comes together to achieve the desired results.

There are many additional ways to focus attention on the organization's desired results and vision. These include creating and rewarding small successes and building on these; presenting information regarding the most important results first; labeling organizational elements to reflect the vision (e.g., Disneyland's vehicles are driven by "transportation hosts"); communicating the



organization's mission or vision in promotional materials for customers, suppliers, and prospective employees; and giving all employees wallet cards and posters stating the mission and vision.

It is important to acknowledge the achievement of results with rewards that are congruent with the vision. For example, money reinforces a vision of financial success, sabbaticals or vital new assignments support innovation, and celebrations strengthen a vision of community or family.

It is equally important to acknowledge current reality and how it converges with and diverges from the vision. Monitoring the organization and its environment formally through surveys and progress reports, and informally by observing and speaking with people, and heeding one's intuition, are vital. Bridges emphasizes the importance of being aware of and confronting the organization's difficulties. Clients must accept that certain arrangements are not working and abandon them, stop making excuses for past or current failures, take responsibility for creating what they want, help compensate people for the losses incurred by change, and create a safe transition between the old and the new organizations.

Several additional factors facilitate successful implementation. One is holding firm to the vision in the face of temptation to compromise. This might mean refusing to ship low-quality product at the end of a quarter, maintaining a "no-layoff" policy during a recession, not exaggerating what one promises to deliver a customer in the face of lowballing competition, or closing down part of a plant to meet environmental standards.

A second factor is helping people see where they fit in and how they can contribute to the organization as change takes place. One of our deepest needs is to be an integral part of something larger than our-

selves. As change alters the aspect of the larger organization, the individual's role in it is redefined and may become unclear to him or her. Hence clarifying both individuals' personal roles and the organization's purpose is essential to the success of the creative process.

Ultimately, successful implementation demands adherence to one principle. The chairman of a *Fortune* 500 company said it: "You do whatever it takes—knowing full well that you won't know what it takes until you've done it."

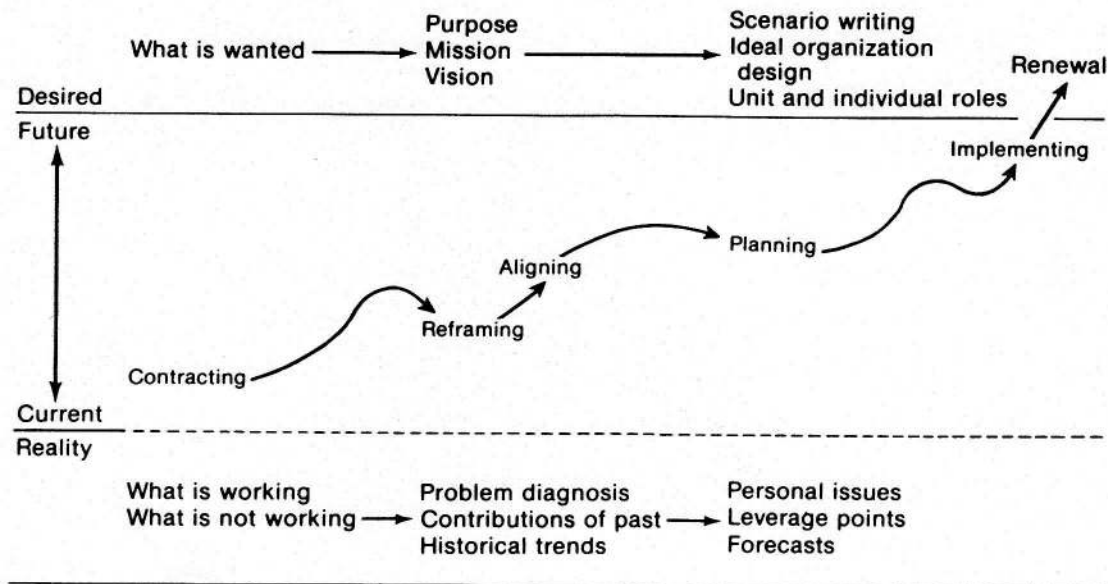
### *Renewal*

Renewal, the final step in purposeful consulting, is the ongoing discovery and striving toward achievement of the organization's purpose. It is accomplished by continually both deepening the organization's appreciation of its vision and improving its understanding of current reality.

More and more organizations are using vision retreats to renew their understanding of their higher purpose. They realize that visions evolve. Creating what they want encourages people to create even more of it, and the vision expands. Alternatively, as clients succeed they discover that their goals are different; the vision changes.

From many points along the way toward achieving a vision, it looks like one cannot succeed. The temptation to ship product below quality standards, to lay people off, or otherwise to apply a quick fix, appears irresistible. Robert Fritz developed the "pivot technique" to guide organizations through such situations. The first step is to take note of current reality. This entails acknowledging what is working and what is not. "We are respected in the market for our honesty, and the competition is taking business away by lowballing us." The second step is to clarify anew what the client really wants, being sure

## THE STRUCTURE OF PURPOSEFUL CONSULTING



not to confuse what is wanted from what he or she thinks is possible. For example, "We want to run an honest company." The third step is to renew commitment to the vision. For one client this commitment meant running an honest company and being willing to go out of business if that were the consequence. The fourth step is to move on, which may initially involve continuing as before, changing direction, or stepping back to reflect before doing anything at all. Sometimes during this pivot process clients decide they want something different; the vision changes. More often, they discover they still really want the same thing, even though they do not yet know how to achieve it.

The fundamental question in all these cases is "What do we really want?" By contrast, most managers first ask, "What can we do?" or "How can we avoid what we do not want?" When deciding to develop a new product line or customer base, for example, the questions asked can make a big difference

to a company's long-term viability. Choosing to expand from selling instruments to selling computers, or to service the consumer as well as military markets, can lead either to outstanding growth, or to internal conflict, wasted resources, and organizational decline. If the motivation is to achieve a higher purpose, such as to serve more people better, the organization is likely to succeed in establishing a new direction. If the motivation is simply to make more money or to avoid being hurt by changing demands or competition, the venture is likely to fail.

Two additional sources of renewal are the organization's hiring and orientation process and its systems for learning. New employees are a principal resource for organization growth. Being honest and direct with them about the organization's mission and vision, and enabling them to develop a deeper appreciation for their own purpose, can strengthen their alignment with the company early on. Recruitment ads, hiring interviews,

and orientation programs are all valuable opportunities to convey the organization's vision.

Organizational learning also provides important new input. The internal and external environments continually offer new information on current reality and how the organization can best achieve its purpose. Surveys, training, sabbaticals, and action learning projects that involve multiple departments or organizations are among such information sources.

The progressive building and release of creative tension in the consulting process is depicted in Exhibit 4.

#### THE ART OF PURPOSEFUL CONSULTING

Mastering a skill means more than taking a series of prescribed steps. The purposeful consultant must learn to read between the lines and improvise to accommodate each unique set of circumstances. The previous section of this article shows the notes. This closing section points the consultant toward creating the music.

Clients and client organizations come in all types. Some are aware and accepting of their current strengths and problems, and they are eager to create a new future. Others prefer to gloss over existing problems and deny that the future might be different from the idealized present. Still others are painfully and helplessly embedded in problems and find it difficult to envision a desirable future. The purposeful consultant must be sure first to convey respect for the client's current experience and then to help him or her clarify the remaining anchor points. Whatever the client's state at the start of consultation, his or her vision of a desired future, appreciation of existing strengths, and assessment of problems are all required for establishing the creative tension that will enable the client to take creative action.

The consultant must also help clients see that the way they interpret current performance has a greater influence on future success than does the level of performance itself. Current success can clarify the client's purpose and lead to further success, or it can produce arrogance, which leads to failure. For example, a young company might respond to initial success with a plan for controlled growth that ensures quality in its area of expertise, or it might overextend itself in the mistaken belief that it can now accomplish anything. Similarly, current failure can generate either determination that leads to success, or fear and resignation, which reinforce failure. The consultant can guide clients to respond to reality in ways that benefit them.

The consultant must also support both individuals and the organization to achieve their respective purposes. These purposes usually overlap but are rarely identical. For example, an individual's purpose might be to contribute to his or her family and society, while the organization's might be to serve a particular customer base profitably. Individuals are supported by seeing the organization as one vehicle toward achieving their personal purpose. This perception enables them to choose to be a part of the organization, rather than feel manipulated into serving it. Such a stance strengthens both the individual employees and the organization as a whole. People given this choice typically elect to remain with the organization and become more productive than before. Similarly, when the organization clarifies its own purpose, it can help employees choose whether or not to stay.

Because he or she holds the greatest formal power, the organization's leader frequently requires the greatest support from the consultant in letting alignment occur. As Roger Harrison points out, the CEO feels he or she has the most to lose in allowing others in the organization to influence the organization's purpose. His or her willingness and abil-

ity to see alignment as a source of even greater power is essential to releasing the energies of more people.

Perhaps the ultimate art of purposeful consulting is to help ourselves and clients make peace with the seemingly perilous uncertainty and apparently unmanageable interdependency that confront us all. According to one metaphysical principle, everything (past, present, future; good, evil; here, there; we, they) exists simultaneously. Our dream is to access that totality and our challenge is to acknowledge and transcend the perception that only part of it is true. Interdependence is the totality; uncertainty is the perception. Solutions and answers are always partially true, while problems and questions help us access greater truth. Dealing successfully with change expands our awareness of that which is changeless. Creating what we want is not separable from discovering what is. It is in living with and synthesizing these differences that our effectiveness and fulfillment are finally found.



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Many traditional approaches to developing and changing organizations can be reframed and applied in a purposeful consulting context. These include the change model created by Richard Beckhard and Reuben Harris and presented in their *Organizational Transitions: Managing Large Systems Change* (Addison-Wesley, 1977, revised in 1987) and strategies and tactics adopted by today's excellent organizations, as described in *A Passion for Excellence* by Tom Peters and Nancy Austin (Random House, 1985).

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