
TARGET ARTICLE

EXECUTIVE CONSULTING UNDER PRESSURE: A CASE STUDY

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This consulting psychology case study describes how an initially nonvoluntary consulting engagement with an executive client in a highly complex nuclear industry organization evolved from suspicion to trust, enabling the client to achieve work-related goals. Methods used by the consultant, and reactions to those efforts by the client, are presented and discussed. The intervention evolved from executive coaching to team development opportunities, intergroup conflict management assignments, behavioral skills training, special fact-finding assignments, and, ultimately, to a long-term, system-wide organization development and change. The paper presents the case from the perspectives of both the consultant (the senior author) and the initial client (the junior author). Factors that seemed to contribute to the success of the coaching process are also described.

Keywords: executive coaching consulting psychology case study, nuclear power industry OD, consulting, organizational trust

This consulting psychology case study describes how a complex, nonvoluntary coaching engagement with an executive client in the nuclear power industry evolved from suspicion to trust, enabling the client to achieve his goals and expanded roles for the consulting psychologist in the client organization (Kilburg, 2005). The intervention evolved from executive coaching to team development opportunities, intergroup conflict management assignments, behavioral skills training, special fact-finding assignments, and, ultimately, to a long-term, system-wide Organization Development (OD) and change.

We begin with a description of the context in which the executive coaching engagements took place. The case is told from the perspectives of the organizational consultant (the first author) and the executive who was the focus of the first part of the consultation (the second author). Although each author recalls the context somewhat differently and emphasized alternative aspects of the case, this initial description of the context is an integration of both of our recollections.

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Authors' Backgrounds and Consulting Roles

The Executive Client

At the time of this consultation the executive client (the second author) had 26 years of experience in quality control (QC) and quality assurance (QA) in the nuclear industry. Management Consultants (MC)¹ employed the client as an executive consultant. UX² contracted with MC for several executive consultants, including the client, to provide advice on the quality program implementation at nuclear power plants (NPP).³ UX asked MC to have the client replace its Vice President (VP), QA and to take over line responsibility for the QA function.

The Consultant/Coach

At the time of the initial consultation, the consultant was in his second year as the director of MC's OD Department. At that time he had 22 years of OD and change practice, management skills training, and executive development. He was also an experienced, licensed clinical psychologist.

MC expected the consultant to both work on and to expand existing OD projects and to generate new contracts. The NPP engagement was a high risk, high potential project that had the potential to make or break his credibility within MC, UX, and the nuclear power industry.

The Client's Context

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) created and enforced requirements for complex backup safety systems on a continuing basis to assure that NPPs were built and operated safely. When NRC audits reveal unsatisfactory conditions, new equipment has to be designed, built, and installed while, simultaneously, workers tear out objectionable structure and systems as well as older equipment. This adds considerably to labor and material costs and schedule delays.

Much of the pressure to increase the pace and quality of construction stemmed from the fact that NPP had been planned to have been completed and online after a 7 year construction period and at a cost of \$600 million. However, at the time of the consultation, the project was already 6 years behind schedule and \$5.4 billion over budget. The average daily cost of running the project was \$1.75 million. Interest on the bonds that financed the NPP project cost \$1 million dollars per day.

At the time of the initial consultation, NPP was about 95% complete and coowned by five electric utilities. UX was the majority owner and was to operate the NPP unit once it went online. Four other utilities were minority coowners. Stockholders and investors were all suffering financially because of the schedule and cost overruns. These groups had pressured UX and the NPP project management team to correct the problems, to satisfy the NRC, to complete the NPP and make it operational so that it could generate electricity and produce revenues.

The project was quite complex. It employed about 7,500 workers over seven shifts per day. The work went on continuously, 24 hr a day, 7 days a week. A project management team coordinated and integrated the specialized activities of and liaised with representatives of the coowner utilities, the state public service commission, the NRC, the architect-engineering firm, contractors, subcontractors, and various functional groups (e.g., QA, design engineering, field engineering, test engineering, and human resources [HR]). Each of these had their own agendas and interests that were in conflict with one another.

Many permanent UX employees had been redeployed to the project and were augmented by a variety of specialized technical expert (*techspert*) consultants (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001). The latter were mostly employed by MC and contracted to UX and the NPP project as "extra pairs of hands" and "rented" executives.

¹ "MC" is an assumed name for the consulting firm.

² "UX" is the client organization's assumed name.

³ "NPP" denotes an assumed name of the specific project and nuclear power plant projects in general.

The *espoused* values governing the NPP project were constantly announced in public, in order of their priority: safety, quality, schedule, and cost. However, the *evident* values that were driving the project behind the scenes were schedule and cost.

A great deal of the cost and schedule inflation consisted of “rework” because much of the completed work did not satisfy the standards and criteria of the NPP QC auditors (“checkers”) or, more important, the NRC inspectors. By applying the principles of W. Edwards Deming (1982) and his Total Quality Management (TQM) concept to their operations, a fundamental paradigm shift was undertaken: away from QC to QA where *building quality into production* became the responsibility of the producers (or “doers”). Making this shift became the client’s primary mission.

Historically, the producers in each of the various trades had been pressured by their respective managements to constantly increase production as *quickly and efficiently* as possible. In practice, *safety* and *quality* were secondary concerns. QC inspectors either passed or rejected work *after* it had been produced. Rejected work had to be reworked. If producers built quality into their work, overall production rates would fall while the amount of accepted work would increase, resulting in a significant net gain. To make this transition, both the producers and the QC inspectors had to navigate a fundamental shift in their respective roles.

Inspectors had to learn to enact the role of QA *consultants* to educate and to enable the producers to alter their priorities, attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices to assure that they built quality into their production. QC personnel had to revise the intrinsic power of their previous roles and to shift from being authoritarian and directive to being more helpful, empathic, and supportive resources to enable the producers. Many QC inspectors and their managers experienced undeclared anxiety about their capacities to let go of their old competencies and practices that were in their comfort zone and learn to carry out their new QA role responsibilities.

Producers’ new work requirements also conflicted with their prevailing performance management systems that rewarded high production rates rather than low rework rates. Thus, the performance management system also had to be modified by UX’s HR department.

The managers and employees of the old QC department and the managers and producers of the various contractors, subcontractors, and subsubcontractors organizations reportedly felt threatened by these radical role shifts. They had to abandon many aspects of their familiar role with which they felt competent, confident, and comfortable. They had to learn new, unfamiliar theories, strategies, and practices in participative goal setting, planning, managing, supporting, and evaluating the performance of the front-line workers.

We predicted that the various organizations and people would resist this fundamental role change. Overt resistance would rarely be shown since that would have violated UX’s and NPP’s cultural norms against insubordination and might have derailed their careers. More likely, resistance would be exhibited in more indirect ways: low energy, passivity, apparent helplessness, dependency, reactivity, hostile compliance, and help-rejecting complaining. It was into this context that the consultant (the senior author) entered the organization.

The Situation Immediately Before the Initiation of the Consultation-Coaching Engagement

The Executive Client’s Story

MC was called upon to help UX after the NRC Construction Appraisal Team submitted a strong report about the serious shortcomings in UX’s quality program implementation at NPP. I was one of several MC executive staff members who had been asked to assist UX in preparing a response to the NRC report. We were not to get directly involved in implementing any corrective plans. We soon realized that UX needed a lot of help and that AE/CM was a big part of the overall problem that had contributed to the QA problems.

During this initial period, I had moved my family closer to UX, so I would not have so far to travel on weekends to be with them. MC’s CEO called to say that UX wanted me to replace the VP, QA for both the fossil and nuclear divisions. After discussing it with UX’s CEO and President, I

accepted the position of Director of QA reporting directly to the UX CEO even though I was still an MC employee.

The UX CEO introduced me to his subordinate QA managers as being the new Director of QA. This first meeting set the tone for my entry into the organization's system and culture. I reviewed the problems that were revealed by the most recent NRC audit that had to be corrected. I was dismayed and frustrated to find that each of the QA Managers continually made excuses about why things were so bad. None seemed to be willing to admit that they had contributed to the causes or to the perpetuation of the problems. They liked the previous VP QA and were sorry that he had been displaced after so many years with the company. The replacement carried a message that they, too, could be fired, regardless of their length of "loyal service." The QA managers claimed their QA auditors were not qualified, not trained, and were being poorly supervised. The auditors, in response, felt they were being discriminated against and were preparing to file a lawsuit.

In a relatively brief period of time I gathered a lot of pertinent information about my QA managers. The Fossil QA Manager was a civil engineer with no QA experience. The Administration QA Manager was the former head of QA before the VP QA took his place. He seemed to resent being replaced and to want to prove that passing him over was a mistake. The Nuclear QA Manager was highly political, and seemed to enjoy making deals with other departments that had the effect of making him look good. He had had no prior nuclear experience.

All the QA managers stated that they had difficulty in influencing the contractors to do their jobs properly and to implement an effective QA program. None seemed to know what needed to be done to turn things around, even after the very specific (and very adverse) report from NRC's Construction Appraisal Team's audit.

My assessment was that many of these individuals lacked proper training and experience to perform their jobs effectively. The QA procedures the QA managers and auditors were to follow were written up as checklists that enabled them to check off items, presumably to determine the requirements for design, procurement, construction, testing, installation, and the like, and then to verify that they were satisfied with what had been done. They seemed to not consider the implications of what they were doing. For example, they approved a requisition for purchasing nuclear waste shipping containers that the QA engineers had approved yet the federal licensing requirements that were required for the supplier to meet were missing. The QA engineers did not recognize nor did they understand that the package was incomplete. I was very upset and told the managers that QA engineers were paid good money to think through what they were doing. It was unsatisfactory to check off listed items without considering the systemic implications.

I completely revised the procedures. I replaced the checklist with specific quality standards and criteria that forced the QA people to think about and determine whether they were met before approving a package. Then, I made sure they were given specific training to understand the importance of the criteria.

As I learned what competencies my QA managers required and who had mastered which competencies, I requested and received permission to replace a number of employees with fully qualified, external expert QA managers. My new hires had lots of nuclear plant design, construction, and operating experience.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

I needed a contract that would make MC's OD function visible, credible, and relevant to MC's techspert consultants, leaders, and the nuclear power industry. NPP already had MC personnel in place as contract employees, including the project manager and the Director, QA (my client). I was told a little about the critical situation at NPP and the vital role that the client was performing. I was also told that, however bright he was, the client was perceived to be ineffective because of his reported impatience and short temper. I was told, ambiguously, "He can get a little aggressive." Because my executive client was an MC employee, if he failed, MC would be perceived to have failed as well. It was imperative for my client to be successful.

The Initial Consulting Contact

The Executive Client's Story

It was during this period of trying to reorganize the QA department and replacing several of the managers that I (the first author) initially met the consultant (the second author). My first encounter with the consultant was something of a shock. I was extremely busy and this individual—who had little nuclear experience and no QA experience—walked into my office and told me that he was here to help me and that he would be tagging along with me everywhere I went so he could observe what transpired. I was very suspicious. I thought, “Why did MC send the Director of the OD department to work with me? What is his real purpose?” I assumed he was sent as an MC spy to check up on me. Because MC had enough confidence to put me in this position, I did not need someone at my side all day every day for a week. I told the consultant how I felt and that I did not want him bothering me. On top of all the problems I was trying to solve to get NPP's QA program turned around, his presence was a distraction.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

As the consultant, I (the first author) made an appointment with the project manager, who was also an MC employee. My view was that anything less than a clear success would cast doubt on the value that could be added by OD as an enabling discipline that should be partnering with techspert consultants. In addition, if I failed, my executive client might also fail—and MC could lose a lucrative contract.

The project manager was cordial but reserved and quite impatient to conclude the interview. He had never heard of OD or the value it was purported to add. He was concerned that my client (the second author) had yet to show he could be effective in converting his subordinate managers and individual contributors from QC to QA to reduce the need for rework. He was skeptical that I—a nonengineer and non-QA person—could help him but he said that he would support my effort to help. He was subjected to pressure from his (and my and my client's) MC bosses. He called my client to set up an immediate appointment with me and directed me to the client's office.

At the initial meeting with the client, after a few introductory pleasantries, I had planned to ask him a series of standard questions. These included: what have you been trying to accomplish?; what results have you achieved to date?; what obstacles have you run into?; what did you do about those obstacles?; how effective were you in dealing with those obstacles?; what have you learned from your efforts?; what do you intend to do now? However, my client insisted on assessing my experience in NPP construction projects and QA, my training, and past work experiences. Most importantly, he wanted to know why I was consuming his very scarce time. I was very transparent about my education and training as well as about my limited experience in the nuclear power industry.

My client's response to this information was immediate: “You must be out of your mind! I don't need a psychologist!” However, he was also caught in a bind. He had two bosses: the CEO of UX and the QA Director at MC. Both had interests at risk that depended on my client's being successful. My client had to please both bosses by succeeding in his mission to fulfill his mission and secure his future. My client was understandably not happy.

Skeptical and as busy as he was, my client asked me what I could contribute to the situation. I said that I could not be sure how I might help without actually seeing him in operation. For example, he had been described as being too aggressive, but that did not tell me the specific manifestations, the conditions under which that surfaced, with whom, or with what consequences. I suggested that I might serve as a *shadow consultant*: following him around, observing his routines and his encounters with his various stakeholders, and sitting in on his meetings. He did not like this idea at all. He seemed to think that I would be studying him like a subject in a laboratory experiment.

Negotiating the Consulting Agreement

The Executive Client's Story

We discussed the situation a little more. The consultant assured me he was not a spy and that I would be his primary client. If MC wanted to know how things were going they would have to talk directly to me, not him. He asked if we could at least try it for a week and then decide. I reluctantly agreed, although it was against my better judgment.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

My client and I negotiated an agreement for me to shadow him for one week. If he did not see any value in my work with him by then, the NPP project would pay my expenses but not my consulting fees, and I would go back to MC's home office.

The First Week of the Engagement

The Executive Client's Story

The consultant followed me everywhere I went and attended each meeting. He was quiet but took many notes. At the end of the day we drove together and met at a local bar across the street from the motel at which we both were staying. We talked over drinks and dinner, discussing what transpired during the day and what was coming up the next day. During these evening conversations I explained the shift from nuclear QC to QA, what I was trying to accomplish, and what I saw as the obstacles that impeded my efforts.

During this initial period, I mentioned that one of the many problems I had to face was being taken to court by some UX QA department employees in a \$21 million law suit against MC, UX, and me for discrimination. This related to the NRC audit that took place before I arrived at UX. The lawsuit was diverting me from the more urgent, critical matters at the NNP project. However, I had to deal with it promptly.

During one conversation about how I was dealing with the auditors who were serving the suit, the consultant offered some useful advice. He noted that I could use this lawsuit to send a message that I would not accept detractors and nonperformers on the NPP construction site. I acted on it and found that this advice served me well. I made arrangements to transfer these dissidents to other departments within the company. The trial took place, I testified, and, in the end, the auditors lost the lawsuit.

In retrospect, I believe this incident was the turning point in my relationship with the consultant. After that, we became good friends. We came to respect each other's expertise and opinions and worked as a good team in identifying and resolving many personnel related problems. These resolutions eventually resulted in improved quality and the successful completion of the plant.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

We started right away. My client did everything very fast. He told me who he was going to see, what issues were on the table, what he wanted to accomplish, what support or resistance he expected, and how he planned to achieve his objectives. His primary concern was converting old-line QC people by getting them to hear, understand, accept, and support a fundamentally different QA program than what they were accustomed to. (He understood he did not need them to fully agree with him; he needed their compliance.) This shift entailed having QA engineers *consult* with producers to assure they built quality into the work itself. He found these QA auditors and their managers to be passive but resistant to this vision. In response, my client felt frustrated and annoyed so he pushed them harder. They backed away from a direct confrontation but did little else. My client then pushed even harder. They had excuses for their noncompliance (it was usually someone else's fault). My client acknowledged that he did get "a little aggressive."

I asked questions intended to help me understand any relevant history with the people and the issues he would be dealing with in these meetings. I also inquired about my client's implicit

assumptions, beliefs, and values that informed his thinking, feelings, and plans of action. He was responsive to my questions and proved to be a wonderful educator.

My client explained while I listened, asked more questions, and learned a great deal about NPP construction and operations, the critical role of quality, the differences between QC and QA, and the tremendous pressure that was pushing all of the involved parties. He displayed a masterful understanding of the complexities inherent in these kinds of systems.

At his various on-site meetings, I sat to one side and observed everyone's body language. I was particularly attentive to the way my client operationalized his intended strategies and tactics. My observations confirmed my client's assessment about his managers. For the most part, the managers did refuse to acknowledge any personal responsibility for problems. They claimed that viable solutions were beyond their control. As my client's frustration increased, his neck turned red—and the redness rose up to his ears and face. He seemed to build up to a boiling point: his voice rose, he jabbed his fingers at these miscreants, and demanded their compliance. They backed off, promising they would follow his directives. I thought it unlikely that they would actually do what my client wanted. By the end of these meetings, he was frustrated and angry. His QA managers looked frightened. I thought they hoped that my client was going to be just another brief thunderstorm that they would have to endure on their way to retirement.

After each meeting my client and I debriefed. I asked him how effective he thought his actions were in achieving his desired results. He acknowledged that he was not nearly as effective as he needed to be. He was not getting the heart-felt willingness to collaborate that he sought. He was also collecting a lot of evidence that his QA managers were not qualified to perform their requisite responsibilities. We reviewed his actions to assess which of them seemed to move his QA managers in the direction of his desired results and which were ineffective or counterproductive. Then, we considered alternative behaviors with which he might experiment at his next meeting.

This became the typical interaction pattern between us: I prebriefed him going into meetings and debriefed him afterward. Every meeting illuminated another issue or two that became the subject of our evening interactive tutorials. My respect for him increased as I came to appreciate his knowledge, experience, and vision.

Before too long, I introduced a third element into the shadow coaching process. During my client's meetings, I recognized the cues indicating he was about to get "too aggressive." When he ran into his subordinate managers' doubts, skepticism, rejection, or anything short of enthusiastic acceptance, my client shifted from an advocacy to an adversarial style. His people responded mostly in a nonverbal manner: leaning backward, avoiding eye contact, not asking obvious questions, not saying what they thought or felt. When I saw these kinds of cues, I wrote a note on a small pad of paper, tore it off the pad, and passed the sheet to my client. Sometimes I wrote a suggestion, sometimes an analysis. The notes were very short. My client usually experimented with acting on these notes.

I recall one particularly impactful note I wrote when I saw him warming up his index finger as a prelude to expressing a strongly worded criticism in response to a QA manager's effort to defend an ineffective action that he had taken. I simply wrote, "He knows what your concerns are. What is he thinking? Ask a question." This seemed to interrupt what I feared would otherwise become another counterproductive exchange. My client paused, constructing the question he would ask. After a few moments, he asked, "What did you think was going to happen when you did that?" The manager hesitated and then disclosed his untested assumption. My client raised questions about the validity and relevance of the manager's assumption. He was refreshingly nonjudgmental. This line of inquiry seemed to elevate the managers' implicit and untested assumptions to conscious awareness where all parties could then test them for validity.

The results were sometimes very gratifying. My client and some of his managers began to productively challenge one another and found some common ground on the basis of which they began to develop a shared mission, goals, and strategies that supported the QA approach. This beginning promised to have some positive potential. Of course, it took a long time with *many* repetitions before anything resembling a trusting commonality began to evolve. Some of the

managers withheld themselves from this process and, later, surreptitiously tried to undermine my client's efforts.

Perhaps more importantly, this process enabled my client to get an accurate assessment of his QA managers' values, competence and developmental potential. Unfortunately, these were well below his standards and confirmed his belief that many of his key people were simply unqualified to perform their assigned responsibilities.

In explaining his concerns to me, my client rehearsed the lines he would use with his subordinate managers. I fed back to him how he was coming across to me. We discussed how others might perceive and react to his behavior. He was willing to experiment with his tone of voice, volume, nonverbal gestures, and facial expressions.

The Second Phase: Building Trust

The Executive Client's Story

The consultant participated in the second set of meetings I held. The first of these concerned one of the major obstacles I encountered early on: trying to resolve the problems I had with the AE/CM project QA manager. While preparing to respond to each of the NRC adverse audit's findings, I had several discussions with this person regarding specific details of the NRC audit. I soon realized that he believed that all the problems were UX's fault, not AE/CM's. He seemed to feel that his company could do no wrong. I got only excuses. He did not engage with me to find or create solutions. He made promises but never kept them. He had been on the NPP project so long that he had become a major element of the problem. He looked uncertain, often confused, and did not show me he knew how to manage his own operation. Nor did he relate well with UX, the customer. He seemed mostly to cover up for his home office in an apparent bid to keep AE/CM free of any appearance of culpability.

I was totally frustrated with this person. The consultant and I discussed what I felt like doing (and the possible consequences of that), and some alternative strategies. I decided on a forceful strategy. I insisted on a meeting with the AE/CM Corporate QA VP. I explained to him the situation and demanded the immediate removal of his QA manager. Without much debate, the QA VP agreed. Further, I insisted on interviewing the QA manager's replacement so that I was satisfied before allowing the replacement to come on board in this key position. The QA VP agreed to this as well.

Later, before meeting with the prospective replacement, the consultant and I discussed how I could make an accurate assessment to determine if the candidate was qualified. The meeting went quite well; I was satisfied. However, I discussed my logic for accepting the QA VP's recommendation with the consultant before announcing my decision. We agreed that the change should be made and, the next day, I told the QA VP that I accepted his recommendation. The new QA manager turned out to be qualified, constructive, cooperative, and effective in working in the best interest of the project in solving the quality problems. He became an active contributor to the effort to make sure the plant would be built, licensed, and operated.

The consultant was also involved in a third series of critical meetings with the Project Manager at the NPP site. Before I arrived on site, but after the adverse audit by the NRC Construction Appraisal Team, a new project manager (another MC executive employee) was brought onto the NPP site. He had just completed a successful NPP project where he had been the cost and scheduling manager. He had apparently done a good job. He drove the project by schedule and cost but lacked a comprehensive appreciation of the other elements that were necessary to satisfy the QA program requirements to which we were committed. As such, he pretty much ignored the other two values that were said to operate within the project: safety and quality.

One weekend, this project manager was touring the construction activities and came across some QA personnel at work. He thought their inspections were having an adverse impact on his critical path schedule. Without authority, he demanded the QA personnel leave the area. I was informed of the situation and immediately indicated that this was never to happen again. After a lengthy, heated discussion we came to a mutual understanding and temporarily resolved the conflict. I discussed the encounter with the consultant to assess my role in the confrontation. We thought that,

although I seemed to be successful in influencing the project manager for the moment, I would probably have some difficulties with him later on other issues.

The project manager continued to sacrifice safety and quality for schedule and costs. With my encouragement, UX (and MC) executives soon replaced the project manager with another executive employee from MC. This new project manager brought the values into proper alignment and improved operations. The results were gratifying and we proceeded much more smoothly from that point on.

Another major event related to reinspecting each commodity that had been installed in the plant on a statistically valid sample basis. This would satisfy the NRC that the quality of the installed components in the plant met the license requirements. Our plan was presented to and approved by the NRC. Once we obtained the approval, we brought in a large number of seasoned personnel to do the inspections and to document every characteristic that did not satisfy the drawing and specification requirements. Nonconformance reports were passed to the project engineers for disposition. Most of the reported nonconforming conditions were minor and had no adverse consequences. One by one, each commodity was reviewed until all passed. This resolved the NRC's remaining concerns with quality. NRC's confidence was restored and they allowed us to proceed with the final testing of the plant. Once the operating license was received, the plant went into successful commercial operation.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

My client seemed to gradually change his ideas about some of his managers and their direct reports. Instead of seeing all of them as obstacles to change, he began to view some of them as *constituents*. He empathized with some of them, recognizing that by introducing the QA approach, he was pushing them out of their comfort zones. My client knew he had to help his people navigate this changing landscape. With increasing certainty, he also knew that some of them lacked the capacity to make the transition.

As we moved from one meeting to another, my client increasingly met frustrating circumstances with consistently optimistic yet firm, high expectations. He asked his people about obstacles that they encountered and prompted them to think through how they could cope with these. Only some of them engaged in this process. When they ran out of alternatives, my client suggested some options they had not considered. He expressed respect and appreciation for whatever thoughtfulness and effort his people showed when it looked like they were moving in the direction of embracing QA. Some—certainly not all—of these QA managers gradually replaced avoidance, excuses, and malicious compliance with mutual optimism and cooperation.

Before our one-week trial period for my shadow consulting was over, my client asked me if I was available for a few more weeks even though he was not fully comfortable with my shadowing. We continued our work.

In the QA department, he asked me to expand the scope of my work by collecting useful information from key stakeholders through a series of anonymous individual interviews. I fed back the summaries of these interviews to my client and then to his QA managers. This information was useful in creating more of a comprehensive understanding of the intergroup issues involved in this transformation from QC to QA.

Our evening debriefings and preparations also expanded as my client considered how to address emerging problems with the AE/CM QA manager, the project manager, and the NRC. We considered his goals for each of these critical interactions as well as his strategies and style. He decided to adopt a somewhat risky but ethical position. He advocated compliance with the values of safety and quality because they seemed to be underrepresented by all parties, except for the NRC. He spoke to the need for fully qualified, competent people to fill all critical positions, rather than having staff in positions based on loyalty or length of time in service. He knew that taking this position would violate the prevailing cultural norms he was trying to change. We discussed how taking this position would probably engender various forms of resistance and considered what he might do to manage and make use of this resistance.

Within the QA department, my client understood that he would have to be clear about the kinds of behavior that were and were not acceptable for QA personnel. He obtained permission from the

UX president to replace nonperforming QA managers with highly qualified people that he brought in from other projects. This was difficult since one of UX's values was loyalty to long-term employees who had dedicated their careers to the company. He transferred nonperforming managers to less critical, nonnuclear parts of the company. The impact of these personnel moves was rather dramatic.

As for his initiatives with the AE/CM VP of QA, the project manager (and, later, UX and MC executives), and the NRC, my client was effective on all fronts. This reinforced his preferred style of telling his story as he saw it and assertively demanding agreement with what he thought was the proper way of dealing with each issue.

Establishing Credibility With a Self-Assessment and Training Intervention

The Executive Client's Story

The consultant suggested that the problems I was having with my subordinate managers, QA auditors, project manager, and representatives of the AE/CM and other contractors at least in part may have been caused by differences in how we processed and exchanged information. He suggested that my staff and I could participate in an exercise with a personality measure. This turned out to be extremely helpful. It helped me recognize the differences between people and how these preferences could be used effectively to increase the meaningful exchange of information. This led to greater collaboration among most members of the QA department in our common efforts. Learning to take advantage of our differences instead of rejecting others' points of view that did not coincide with mine certainly helped me become more effective within and between QA and all other NPP stakeholders.

This new way of being mindful about what I said, to whom, and how I said it required practice and feedback. My consultant helped with both. It would have been easy to slip back into my automatic reactions if not for our ongoing discussions.

The Consultant-Coach's Story

Based on our discussions and my observations of how my client communicated with others, I concluded it would be beneficial to "experiment" with a training intervention that would illuminate some of the individual differences among QA members. The personality measure I employed was a low risk, high payoff intervention that people generally experience as intriguing and not threatening. They were so oriented to linear, technical logic, they were surprised to discover that, because people have unique ways of processing information and communicating, they could unintentionally create misunderstandings, confusion, frustration, and anger even when trying to solve purely technical problems.

I had all of the QA department members take the test and had the results scored by computer. Before feeding back the results, I delivered a theory session on the measure (the Myers Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI; Briggs Myers, 1980; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1992). I also described the four MBTI temperaments (Keirsey, 1987; Keirsey & Bates, 1984). I then fed back the results, answered questions, and asked the participants to create a group matrix based on the temperaments to produce a "group portrait" of the QA department.

The resulting display was quite revealing. Not unexpectedly, the majority of these people saw themselves as SJ (Sensing-Judging) temperaments, some preferred the NT (iNtuitive-Thinking) temperament, very few were NF (iNtuitive-Feeling) temperaments, but none were SP (Sensing-Perceiving). We discussed the implications of these results for them as individuals and as an organizational subsystem whose members had to interact with each other and with a variety of different stakeholder groups. They shared stories about difficult interactions they had that they could now understand more completely and from a considerably different perspective.

We explored how their preferences for processing information result in significant differences in the extent to which they effectively engage each other and the producers in solving quality problems. Of particular interest to the QA managers and auditors was the "Z-Theory of Problem

Solving” (Kroeger & Thuesen, 1992). This demonstrated how they, being primarily SJ types, typically overemphasize specific facts and details (Sensing) and objective analysis (Thinking) while underemphasizing consideration of various alternative solutions (iNtuition) and the impact that such solutions might have on other involved parties (Feeling). The intervention helped the participants to better understand their own and others’ preferences and increased their tolerance for interpersonal differences and their willingness to experiment with adapting to and utilizing others’ preferences.

Building Trust: The Emergence of the Trusted Advisor Role

The Executive Client’s Story

Another issue in which I involved the consultant dealt with the fact that many nuclear plants undergoing construction had whistle blowers who would report apparent quality problems to the NRC directly. This caused many delays since each reported item had to be investigated and reinspected to confirm or disprove the existence of an actual quality problem. I proposed that we institute a “Quality First” program through which any individual working on the project could anonymously report any concern regarding the quality of any item. The concern would be immediately investigated and the results would be reported back to the individual. I sent the consultant to study other NPP’s structures, mechanisms, and procedures for collecting and using employees’ concerns about safety and quality. He produced a report that identified several options, along with an assessment of their comparative advantages and disadvantages. We used his report to design our own version. This was quite successful. All reports were anonymous and were investigated. Most were found to be invalid. Those with substance were immediately corrected. The NRC had access to all of this information.

The Consultant-Coach’s Story

My client entrusted me to travel around the country to visit several NPP projects to do some fact-finding on creating and managing anonymous whistle-blower systems. This was proof of the mutual trust that my client and I had developed. I was also pleased that UX did not simply select and copy one of the systems that I studied but, rather, used my report as a framework on which they created their own version. Apparently, I had become a trusted advisor (Maisler, 2000). This assignment enhanced my visibility and credibility within UX; it set the stage for further extension of my work at UX and NPP and, as a result, within MC as well.

The End of the Beginning

The Executive Client’s Story

Given all of these issues, I worked very long hours, with little sleep. My initial reaction to the consultant’s offer to help was that I did not need a personal OD consultant following me around all day long. As our relationship developed and matured, I learned a great deal from the consultant and came to respect him. I am thankful he did not give up on me but worked with me.

Following our initial experience, I encouraged other departments at the NPP project to use the consultant’s services and those of his colleagues. We extended their work for another couple of years. During this period they assisted line managers and technical expert consultants to coordinate and integrate their activities. Their work was finished when the NPP was authorized for start-up.

I also made use of the consultant’s services a second time when I was placed in charge of the restart effort on another NPP. The consultant came through again and this turned out to be another success story. We remained friends after the completion of this project.

The Consultant-Coach’s Story

After a few weeks of coaching, my client asked me if I was available on a full-time, temporary basis for the foreseeable future. I agreed. After all, my MC boss expected me to be a working manager who personally generated consulting revenue.

My client served as an icebreaker and advocate of my services with the rest of the project, especially with the new project manager and his staff. This led to a further expansion of my scope of work into more traditional OD practice as well as a coach and a reliable person to undertake special projects.

It soon became evident that the interest in and requests for OD consultation were greater than my availability. I brought more OD practitioners onto the project. Because we now had both credibility and visibility, the more services we provided, the greater the demand. Soon, I had 12 OD practitioners operating throughout the NPP project.

We maintained this contract until the NPP project was about almost complete and ready for start-up. I then left. After about 18 months working on other projects, my client called me back for an additional engagement that lasted another 14 months or so.

What Made Our Executive Coaching (and Shadow Consulting) Effective?

1. The biggest factor in building trust was the consultant's demonstrated effectiveness in providing helpful suggestions in resolving people-related problems. Once the positive results of these efforts became evident, the client accepted the consultant without reservation. However, the client first had to accept the consultant's involvement before any advice could be given. The option to terminate the consultant's involvement after a 1-week trial gave the client control. He knew he could accept or reject whatever the consultant might offer. Therefore, the client had nothing to lose while testing the possibility that he might learn something useful (Kilburg, 2002).
2. In building mutual trust, the client and the consultant agreed that the client—not the project manager, not UX, and not MC—was the consultant's primary client. If the UX or MC bosses wanted to know anything, they would have to ask the client and/or the people with whom he worked—not the consultant. Therefore, the substantive contents of the interactions between the coach and the consultant were confidential and contributed to trust. The consultant managed this boundary despite considerable pressure from MC's executives to provide detailed reports about the client's performance.
3. The shadow consulting process was critical. If the coaching had been limited to face-to-face discussions of the client's situation and his various interactions with his stakeholders, the client's perceptions and perspective would have provided only a partial, and heavily biased, picture of what was taking place. With his technical, nonpsychological mind-set and mental models, the client probably would not have recognized, understood, or described how his behavior was perceived and responded to by his stakeholders. It was unlikely that he could accurately identify what it was that he was saying or doing that provoked his stakeholders' resistance. The shadow consultant as observer could pick up many aspects of the client's interactions that would otherwise be overlooked by paying particular attention to the nonverbal behaviors of the involved parties (Peterson, 2006).
4. Much of the effectiveness of shadow coaching was a consequence of deliberately setting aside several periods of time each day during which the client could stop to reflect on the four critical, cyclical phases of his interactions with the people he was trying to convert: (1) evaluating his current situation and what he wanted to change and achieve, (2) preparing and planning his next steps, (3) discussing how he engaged his stakeholders and the consequences of how he executed his plan, and (4) making explicit what he did well and what he could do better.
5. Until the consultant demonstrated that he was reliable, trustworthy, credible, and helpful, the client felt he was alone with little support or appreciation for his efforts while also feeling driven by the crisis to quickly achieve tangible results with insufficient time to reflect, analyze, learn, and modify his strategies and plans (Kilburg, 2001). The client was probably feeling quite lonely after work. The consultant therefore became a companion until the client's family moved to the NPP area.

6. The client and consultant used their time together to think through his mission, goals, strategies, practices, beliefs, and values. He felt increasingly willing to discuss these elements. Given his intense interest and curiosity, the consultant asked many questions which the client patiently answered. The client did not expect the consultant to know much about QA and NPP construction. However, the client came to recognize that his disappointment with his people was based on his assumption that they *should* understand, accept, and support his efforts to transform the organization by adopting the QA philosophy and methodology. In educating the consultant and by observing how he was able to learn, the client also learned how to more effectively communicate in a way that helped many of his people to understand his vision—even though some of them did not fully accept it. They considered the sense of loss that his people were likely to experience and how the client could minimize these feelings.
7. In explaining various scenarios to the consultant, the client rehearsed the conversation he intended to use with his subordinate managers. The client and consultant discussed how subordinate managers might perceive and react to his behavior. The consultant then fed back to the client how he was coming across including what changes might be made to communicate more effectively.
8. The client demonstrated his willingness to experiment by changing his approach and style by modulating his tone of voice, volume, and nonverbal gestures and facial expressions. He became much calmer, more balanced and more effective.
9. Another apparently important factor that contributed to the success of the intervention was that the discussions enabled the client to simply ventilate about his frustrations and disappointments. This process appeared to enable him to contain and take the edge off the intensity of his emotions when he was actively engaged with his QA managers (Kilburg, 2000).
10. The consulting process also enabled the consultant to learn about operating in critical situations under urgent conditions in which achieving high quality results quickly was more important than making sure that all involved parties learned from the experience. Thus, the consultant adopted a more directive mode on site than during the informal off-site debriefing and preparation meetings where self-disclosure, inquiry, reflection, and planning took place (Freedman, 1995).

Summary and Conclusion

This case study illustrates the value of consulting psychology for addressing complicated organizational problems that have the potential to affect organizational outcomes. By recognizing the psychological aspects of technologically complex organizational issues, the consulting psychology process was able to help a highly qualified executive to use a different, and better accepted, approach to managing a number of other constituencies within his organization. The client learned how to achieve his and the organization's goals by modifying his leadership style from trying to aggressively dominate those who disagreed and resisted his influence to include a sensitive appreciation of others' defensiveness, anxiety and fear of the unknown. The case also demonstrated the different perspectives that a client and the psychologist had and how those came to change over the course of the intervention.

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