

EDUCATOR AND CHANGE AGENT THE FOREIGN TECHNICAL CONSULTANT:

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At any given moment thousands upon thousands of technical consultants representing a wide range of foreign assistance funding agencies are abroad in places like Ibb, Yeman Arab Republic, Pokhara Nepal or Sokoto Nigeria. These foreign consultants are educators all, in the sense that they come to impart information, share ideas and advise about ways to improve various human systems. Technical assistance provided by these expert consultants requires skills to communicate their expert knowledge, but in addition to this there are many expectations foreign countries consciously and unconsciously place on these people. Knowledge of these expectations would enhance the effectiveness and impact of these technical experts as agents for change. (Schien, 1969.) These consultants are involved in social organizations which could be defined as patterned human behaviour which depends on symbolic interaction with other human beings. (Strauss, 1956.) Symbol use requires effective sending of a message between the sender and a receiver which establishes contact and which imparts meaning. (Howard, 1979.) There is a need for consultants to be aware and able to be involved in less power—coercive roles and more roles one could term mutual re-educative. (Benne, 1976, p. 82.)

The major point of this brief essay is to assert that the expert needs to become learner, to become vulnerable to the influence of the people he comes to consult. As an agent for technical change his effectiveness can be enhanced by understanding their point of view, their need and their expectation.

Consultants represent powerful forces of technology and economics. They operate from within exceedingly complex socio-technological institutions in which much planning is occurring at an ever increasing rate. Yet, the consultant as he stands brushing his teeth in the morning is an individual apart, held by tenuous strings of Telex and sometimes operative telephones to his sending organization. Standing there, he has the ability to exert influence, the effect of which he as a person, will probably not have to deal with in real ways. Unanticipated consequences, arise as a result of human interactions in his consulting role. These unanticipated consequences may emerge out of others' roles and decisions which were not, predictable however, they may also result from his own executive or technocratic behaviour which affects those he comes to assist. (Summer, 1976, p. 15.)

Technical assistance takes many forms in today's frenetic development schemes. In Lahore, Pakistan one could meet six people each from different countries who represent a gamut of technical concerns; these might range from computer banking, textile machinery refinement, monitoring and evaluating irrigation watercourses to academic planning for institution building and curriculum development.

Built into many overseas assistance packages is the component of certain man-months of consulting expertise. Experience has certainly shown that the value of this group in sharing

too many areas of "Noise" which exist in the communication process. Sender thinks he has sent the message to receiver in his Texas drawl, laced with culture specific overtones, but the codes are frequently scrambled. Again, adaptation occurs in smiles, nods and more questions in not so fluent English by the receiver who is struggling to *debris*.^{*} Adaptation would be enhanced through thorough preparation of the consultants who go abroad, preparation related to knowledge of another culture and personal approaches which may optimize idea exchange. Preparation should include training related to how influence occurs. In western countries, influence frequently relates to power coercive instrumentation. The "adversary" model in the highly competitive multi-national corporate world becomes an operational fixation for many. What is needed is "... a creative synthesis which involves the meeting and merging of minds and interests into some new common view which is commonly acceptable and which could not have been formulated by any member or representative in advance of the meeting and deliberation". (Benne, 1976.)

All consultants abroad are *educators, trainers, idea bringers*. Many consultants abroad understand little about the complex nature of their task or what they will really do when they get there except of course, those few *fortunates* who have been around a bit and can tell their own horror stories, or sometimes exceedingly funny episodes of communication disasters. It's almost like getting people together who have had a similar operation such as a Hernia repair. Each can outdo the other with accounts of hospital horror stories. But the consultants who face each other across the breakfast table are usually too shy to reveal their insecurities during such encounters, and seldom share meaningful information about the change process. Instead there is the usual, "Do you know so and so in Clearwater or Buffalo?"

If one accepts the idea that foreign consultants are in fact educators, bringers of ideas for change, then it could be suggested that knowledge about the roles they may play abroad could enhance the degree of awareness and preparation for better *educating* when they get there. In the paragraphs that follow are listed a number of roles consultants are frequently forced to play in addition to the role of technical information giver. These roles are frequently expected of them by host country recipients. Consultants are asked to help conceptualize problems, formulate working assumptions, analyze data, design action research, provide up to date technical information, and help nationals get things moving in frozen bureaucracies, to mention a few.

SOME OF THE UNWRITTEN EXPECTATIONS

1. *Problem Conceptualization*

I have heard from many of my engineer friends that the training they have received provides them with the means to solve problems, apply their basic knowledge to specific and unique tasks of *optimizing* function, creating structures which will allow for efficient process etc. Accepting this at its face value one would hope that other technical areas similarly prepare their professionals. Sadly this is not the case. The big picture, the wholistic overview in which specific problems exist is frequently missed. Too frequently the consultant marches out his vast knowledge for display in such highly technical jargon and mode, in word processor computer print out sheets, which become communication "noise" previously referred to. Problem conceptualization should be written on the cuffs of every consultant going abroad, or pinned to his electric shaver. If problems can be understood, seen in the host country perspective, and related to the area of technology being considered, many frustrations could be overcome. One way not to get at knowledge about problems is the frontal question, "Well, now do you have any problems related to this?" Obviously, or why would the consultant be there in the first place. But the host country reaction is quietness, unwillingness to hang out dirty laundry, or unwillingness to be vulnerable to the admission of problem in professional areas when the Minister is present, or the Federal Cell Head is chairing the meeting. Problem conceptualization requires *effort* talk, time, study reflection and above all a *good* car. During this critical phase of consultation the expert becomes

* Used in the Medical sense of removing dead tissue from a healing wound

un-expert—he learns, listens and listens and asks specific questions which arise out of past experience, present process and because of existing structures.

2. *Formulating Basic Assumptions*

Host country agencies frequently look to consultants for a fresh look and for fresh ideas about technologies and their applications. This is nothing new. Such consultations are used within Western World countries in industries, universities and technical training institutes daily. The outsider unencumbered with internal politics, without care for budget competition and promotion, can exercise a function of formulating basic assumptions much in the way a child focuses the rays of light from a magnifying glass onto a paper and gets the hot spot. Basic assumptions are these hot spots for consideration, the burning issues for change or modification.

A problem frequently faced by expatriate consultants abroad is one which relates to the host country's inadvertently diffusing the focal points for assumption building by the "wine and dine", or "tea and stuff" syndrome. Much ado about something is made. The consultant faces dignitaries, sits in VIP lounges, is feted to "functions" and listen to murmurs of, "I hope you have a good attitude toward us here". Assumptions derive from conceptualizations previously mentioned, but are larger pieces of the consulting stuff.

It is a difficult job to sort out trivia from important concepts in the consulting role. Trivia demand attention daily and because it exists so abundantly it is all too easy to come to the conclusion that this is a framework for development of basic assumptions. For instance, the consultant hears in one briefing after another, all the data which describes the degree to which a given project has met target goals. Though much data presented may be fairly accurate, there is a flaw—the data itself may be trivia in the sense that it obfuscates the development of basic assumptions. Graphs and figures are soothing items of communication which easily lull the consultant into circular thinking. The "real story" behind the figures presented may be well known by host country leaders but are not presented. In many parts of the world, to admit to failure, to admit to areas of problem or even to high-light what a vast amount still needs to be done, is to lose face. Certainly the host country bureaucracy is not interested in putting anything but the right foot forward. The real danger frequently lies in the consultant inadvertently becoming the amanuensis of the host country, while being asked to help formulate basic assumptions.

3. *Data Analysis Synthesizing for Decision Making*

Many consultants are surprised by joy, when host countries show such respect for their acumen that they ask them to perform tasks normally reserved for experts. I am referring to the need to scrutinize data collected by others in preparation for the consultant or in previous projects of a similar nature. Foreign consultants who have a rather conservative view of their roles as learned in highly specialized settings, will find that most of their skills will be tapped, including analyzing and making sense out of existing data. "It's not part of my job description", will not help. Decision making in the foreign consultation process requires that the consultant *per force* gets to big picture and gets parts of the picture as well.

How often does one not hear said by host countries, "If only we could accept the grant but not the consulting experts, how much easier it would be?" Why, you may ask is there such an attitude? Because all too few of our experts abroad take time to do homework before coming, do not insist on accurate briefing when they first come on the job, do not insist on getting the word from the top and the bottom of the bureaucratic heap when they first arrive. What is needed is consultative assertiveness regarding the data analysis process.

3. *Policy Shaping through Dialogue*

If one agrees that in order to bring change one must bring ideas for change, and that this

process is the task of education—then there will be the need to be involved in some ways in the structures and systems in a country where change occurs. Only mad men stand naked and alone and curse the night, changing little other than their immediate environment with noise. But consultants should take great care to become part of on-going dialogue process in host country systems which are utilizing new technology. Much in the same way a master driver education teacher teaches by keeping his hands off the spare wheel, yet talking through ideas built from “data analysis” and deriving basic working assumptions from these. “Put your brakes on, now!” Dialogue in this sense means involvement in communication while on-going systems are operating. Few systems could afford the luxury of going out for a coffee break to have dialogue. Rather, the consultant rides along, hums to himself and asks questions during on-going journeys for change, and sometimes provides words of direct caution. Finally, the consultant should discipline his thinking to ask questions rather than giving answers at this stage. Questions like, “What kind of concepts am I dealing with?” “How will these relate to my major technical task?” “Are the concepts which are emerging theoretical in nature?” “Am I dealing basically with classificational problems and concepts formation?” Monthly reports, or end-of-tour recommendations of consultants have weight far beyond a referred article publication or speech given at a conference. Frequently these recommendations become policy for future funding, programme development and introduction of a new technology. This should give consultants trouble sleeping unless they have asked themselves important questions about the implication of their recommendations for the host country. They will stay, he will leave. His words will shape policy.

5. *Design and Implementation of Action Research*

A consultant who is working on cattle research in the Obudu Plateau in Eastern Nigeria, for example, is likely to be asked to assist with designing and implementing some type of action research. “My terms of reference do not specify such assistance”, though stated with a tinge of apprehension or humility will do little to eliminate the persistent problem of cattle ticks. The consultant should take along in his brief-case, ideas for action research in his specialized area. One of the great contributions a consultant can leave behind is things happening at the field level, people trying out some new ideas brought about by simple suggestions for testing these ideas.

6. *Sharer of Technical Knowledge*

Funding agencies, during the screening process for the selection of suitable foreign consultants, review *curriculum vitae* by the score. If the paper looks right, if the technical expertise is there, if the basics are obviously well mastered, the consultant is contacted and a strange and wonderful process begins. The consultant to be, becomes expert when he signs the contract. This expertise though crucial, represents a base line for the work to come, for the games to be played. Expertise puts a consultant into the international consulting ball park to play. That is all. Beyond that, the co-ordination which will allow for a score, is what this discussion has been about so far. The ability to move with the game, to become a team member, to handle balls without too many fumbles is a most critical skill to acquire and practise.

8. *Unfettered by Tradition and Bureaucracy*

“Please Sir, you speak to the additional Secretary of Development. If I do it, I will be going out of channels”. The consultant has *entrée* to people and decision making parts of a system not allowable for the national professional. The informal structure is not what I am speaking about here. Consultants sit next to top National leaders in Horse and Cattle Show “tattoos”, sit and drink tea with chiefs and king makers with impunity. That’s all part of consultant’s turf. But it is a very important part of his functioning successfully. It is like the decisions that are made in smoke filled rooms elsewhere, except now it will probably be the porch of Government House, sipping G+T with people of influence. Of course, inherent in this *entrée* to channels is a

tremendous responsibility and some concern. National leaders also use these forums to hear out the experts. In reply to legitimate questions by the Minister for Agriculture, if all the consultant can do is suck his teeth and look wise, much ground work or spade work can be rendered useless. Funding agencies would do well to establish a dry-run wet-run before hiring. Common people from home get uncommon attention abroad. They should know how to take such attention and give it too, as persons concerned with persons.

9. *Attention to the Mundane*

There is nothing pleasant sitting with a portable typewriter on one's knees in a steaming hot hotel room with no air-conditioner and the only available drink is Vimto. There is little glamour in waiting for a barge to cross a river and camp out overnight at the crossing because the barge driver had more important evening agendas than one more trip across. There is not much pleasure, ghost writing reports, minutes or letters knowing full well that no author glory will accrue to you, and that if problems arise from these writings that you will be quoted by name. There is such a feeling of let down when one's brief-case is lost in transit and passport, visas, money, notes of two months are lost forever. Consultants become involved in all of life's normal mundane vicissitudes and many more with strange sounding names, Malaria, Bilharizia and Guinea Worm. This is part of the expectation package, to be able to work effectively in unusual environments.

Summary

Its worth it! There are few times in one's professional career when one is put into such a rich environment for personal and professional growth. Seldom is such attention given to one's professions. Seldom does one tap almost all of one's own personal resources to cope, as in foreign consulting, and educating. The old saying, "But there must be a better way!" comes to mind. The way can be improved by host countries asking the right questions about their consultants to be. An improved way can occur if *funding agencies pay as much attention to the bearer of technology as to the technology itself.*

The major point of all of this is to assert that the expert needs to become learner, to become vulnerable to the influence of people he comes to consult. There is an inherent techno-imperialism which frequently surrounds the bringing of new technology, even if requested by the host country. Learning more about them, learning more about the meaning of bringing innovation and technology to another country, learning about the limitations of self as an agent for change in a foreign setting may set the stage for more sensitive ways to bring ideas we value to others in ways which are appropriate for them.

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