JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

# Putting Zing Back into Organizational Consulting

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This article is about the work consultants do with their clients, the way we think and talk with them and the way we think and talk with one another. Management and consulting grew up with a focus on the organization ("the zation"). We want consultants and their clients to pay attention to their organizing ("zing"). A variety of factors have made that distinction visible and a shift in paradigms desirable. One is awareness of the complexity of organizational problems. Another is a growing body of work on practice. Paying attention to zing means new possibilities for practice, but the shift comes at a price: rethinking what it means to be a consultant and changing the expectations of both clients and consultants.

## Are You Thinking About Zing?

Does this story seem familiar? A senior vice-president (SVP) in a small corporation called me (Jennifer) for help. As part of a recent divisional reorganization, a unit had been newly created to deal with issues that had plagued his division for years. The new unit was in the process of getting its focus and vision, still figuring out what its work was, when there was a sense of increasing discord in the whole division. The reorganization had pulled people off the work they were doing. Everyone was feeling pinched and irritable.

To the SVP, the potential for conflict was rife and lines of communication were disintegrating. He worried that unless people learned how to deal with their disagreements, new silos would spring up that were worse than the ones the reorganization was designed to dismantle. He thought some kind of retreat would be just what the group needed. Together, we decided on a joint focus: making sense of the new structure that was in place and building skills around listening to one another and dealing with inevitable conflict. We picked a date, the client found a venue, and I bought my plane ticket.

The first day of the retreat was fantastic. The group was much less divided than I had feared and they were eager to learn new skills and tools. It was not until the end of the first day that I heard the murmurs about two of the members of the group, both from the newly created unit. By the end of the morning session on the second day, the animosity between these individuals was obvious. They interacted tersely, speaking in clipped, polite tones in front of the

*Journal of Practical Consulting*, Vol. 3 Iss. 1, 2008, pp. 7-18

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

consultant. Each one looked as though, given the slightest provocation, he might swat the other. How had I missed this on day one? I mixed the units up on the first day, thinking that the problem was between units, not inside a single unit. This was a team building retreat after all. When we began to examine strategy, the units got together and only then did I see what the SVP knew all along. Now, with the level of anxiety in the room high, the easy banter of the day before was gone. The others were warily watching the two at the heart of the conflict. I took my client aside during a break and asked him to describe these two individuals. "They hate each other," he said. They were both under advisement that their behavior was unacceptable. One of them, the supervisor of the other, has written up a behavior plan that the subordinate had to sign by the end of the retreat or be fired.

It was at this point, in the warm California sunshine with the entire division off site for two days that I realized what the purpose of the retreat should be. It was to deal with the ripple effect of these two people, who were openly hostile to one another, on the organizational culture and on their work. The animosity between the coworkers was not peripheral to the problems in the department; it was part of the root cause of the problems. Without attention in that direction, the retreat was not likely to be very useful. With this new-found knowledge, acquired too late to do any real good, I shuffled some things around, recreated some exercises and finished the retreat being both clearer about the problem and much less clear about my contribution to a potential solution.

## New Ideas to Work With

What do you do if, like Jennifer, you realize the issue that had your attention or the problem they were working on was not what they were after? The moment of recognition that you are heading in the wrong direction, the "ah-ha" that something else is going on here, might not be as dramatic, but the contours of her tale are probably familiar. Certainly it is our impression that this happens frequently, not only in our own work but, listening to other consultants, in theirs as well.

Running into this scenario, a good consultant will probe beneath the surface, explore what went wrong, and vow not to be blindsided again. "Next time it'll be different," this good consultant might say. "Next time I'll have more information going in." Perhaps it is true that next time he will ask different questions and not be caught off guard in just the same way; but there are countless ways to be blindsided, especially if you believe your job is to identify and classify organizational problems so that you can find the right solutions. Consultants are often blindsided because they are, well, *blind* to key aspects of life at work.

This paper is about the work consultants do with their clients. It is about the way we think and talk with them; and it is about the way we think and talk with one another. In Jennifer's story, a piece of information that the client did not know she needed was enough to reshape the intervention she thought he needed. Both client and consultant were busy doing what they do best: filtering out the noise, focusing on the most important pieces of data, and crafting a solution out of those pieces. This is often just the right thing to do and sometimes it is exactly wrong. We filter from the perspective of what we already know. What if that knowledge is insufficient? What if you are filtering out the wrong things and the gunk that gets left behind and discarded is actually what you want?

Our clients, especially our most successful clients, have been rewarded and promoted for being good (and often fast) at seeing a problem, classifying it and solving it. Consultants are also



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good at solving problems. Our assessment is that consultants often think they are hired to be *better* than their clients at solving problems; that is what they are there for. So one way of looking at Jennifer's story is that she was not as good at solving this problem as she could have been; or perhaps she was not as good at diagnosing the problem as she should have been. We are not, however, offering a lesson in how you can better classify or solve problems. Our argument is that the next move for consultants who want to improve their practices comes down to knowing when to shift paradigms. If we know how to do that for ourselves, we will be a lot further down the road in knowing what to do for our clients.

When a new idea comes out, consultants and leaders get excited about it and turn it into a fad, then discover that it is not as useful as they had hoped and they look about eagerly for the next idea and the next fad. This is an entirely human phenomenon and it tends to be misguided (like 9-year-olds struggling to believe in Santa Claus, we know it is a fantasy and somehow we do it anyway). A stream of relatively consistent new ideas in the organizational literature is pointing us towards a different vision of organizations. It also contains a deeply reverberant undertone that the work we are doing is inadequate for meeting the demands of organizations now. What should we make of this literature that includes communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), the role of the new professional (Schön, 1983), the learning organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990), and knowledge management (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Allee, 2003; Von Krog, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000)? Our response is that it is not a matter of debunking earlier ideas. The new literature shows that it is the *way* we treat the ideas and what we do with them that need debunking.

If we simply try to turn the ideas into another set of tools for our toolbox, we are likely to find that they are no more useful than the ones that have preceded them. If, on the other hand, we can begin to believe that they are calling us to develop new and different ways of thinking about organizations and new ways of talking about them, we may be able to shift out of our current (and limiting) problem-solving paradigm and into something more complex, though more expansive and with much greater potential for the work ahead of us.

## The Zation and Zing

The gist of this paper is that there is a lens through which people can see a different, new story of how adults spend their working hours. With the story comes a new set of possible actions for consultants. The story is compelling and helpful, both from the perspective of diagnosis (What has gone wrong?) and prognosis (What will happen? Can we put it right? If so, how can we do it?). It is also a story of its time.

Until quite recently, perhaps the last 15-20 years, the story was simply not accessible. What has made it so is that during this time the ground of Organization Development (OD) has shifted, reflecting deeper shifts in Western thought and a new language has begun to emerge. We have to listen carefully in order to hear it, because our ears are not yet attuned to the ideas and distinctions of the new language. Once you begin to listen differently, you will recognize two distinctly different stories about what goes on in workplaces. Knowing that there are two stories, understanding how they differ and having an appreciation of what each is about, makes a whole range of new practices possible for consultants. If you go into organizations understanding both languages, you run less of a risk of being blindsided because you will be able to see things that were previously hidden from view.



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One story, the older familiar one, we call the *zation*. In this story a consultant is the expert whose job is to diagnose and fix problems. The problems are about the organi*zation*. Until recently, management theory and OD had just the one common story. Senior managers, administrators, and consultants talk to one another about structure, outcomes (efficiency is the goal), deliverables, a mission statement, and processes that you re-engineer. The story of the zation is based on the image of the organization-as-machine (see Morgan, 1986). Sometimes the zation goes wrong and when it does, it has to be fixed. That is where consultants come in. The structure, processes, and outcomes are *things* and consultants have tools and techniques for fixing them. Their practices revolve around restructuring, re-engineering work processes, downsizing, and building IT systems to capture and distribute the organization's knowledge. As Mintzberg and Van der Heyden (1999, p. 87) pointed out, if you "ask for a picture of the [organization]… chances are you'll be handed the company's org chart, with its orderly little boxes stacked atop one another." They pointed to the limited utility of the org chart, saying that it would "show you the names and titles of managers, but little else."

The other, newer story is about *zing*. Rather than a focus on the shape of the organization, in this story the major plotline is the action that takes place there, the organi*zing*. Mintzberg and Van der Heyden (1999) also described what happens when, instead of asking for a picture of the organization, you actually "take a look. In one corner, a group of people are huddled in debate over a vexing logistics problem. In another, someone is negotiating with a customer halfway around the world on the Internet. Everywhere you look, people and products are moving, crisscrossing this way and that" (p. 87). The authors remind us that "using an org chart to 'view' a company is like using a list of municipal managers to find your way around a city" (p. 87).

Zing is in its infancy, coming together from many ideas including communities of practice, the new professional, knowledge management, organization learning, dialogue, stewardship, and meaning making (or sense making) in organizations (Weick, 1995). The elements of the story are still a bit sketchy, but what is emerging is compelling enough to know that you have to pay attention. When you do, the role of consultants (and everyone else's role) is transformed in the most fundamental ways, from fixer to advisor and facilitator. You are dealing with how people interact to get things done. You are not looking for solutions but for practical ways to move forward. In this story, the consultant is a guide who helps people in organizations learn to think, see, and talk in different ways.

The views within these two stories are so different that if you are comfortable with the zation, an orderly structure managed from the top, you might not even be able to understand when people talk about zing, people interacting, discussing, negotiating, and debating with one another and in groups. Zing is work-life. It focuses on people: their interactions and relationships; their attitudes to each other and to what they are doing; and their values and perspectives (what matters, what is important, and how things ought to be done). Images of zing are motion, creativity, spontaneity, novelty, excitement, as well as frustration. By contrast, the only way to understand the zation is as something inert, rigid, and predictable (it has to be if someone controls it), like a large ship that moves only when the captain gives orders and only in the direction she intends.

The gap between the views of the zation and zing, we will see, is both the light and the shadow of the story of zing and is a major hurdle when it comes to shifting consulting practices to focus on organizing.



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## Why is the Zation King?

Science has contributed enormously to our sense of the world and how to make sense of it. Just as our sense of order and structure about the liver and the lungs and about atoms and particles, changes what can be done for the human body, so do scientific metaphors help us understand organizational life. The first large-scale organizations were factories and there science showed its strength: find out how to break down the parts of the job, organize them into separate bits, and train people to perform those bits over and over again. Productivity rises and everyone has a Ford in the driveway.

These days, Fords are fabricated mostly by machines and the great majority of organizations, including government departments, PR firms, and homeowner's associations, provide intangible services, not things. Yet, the metaphor of organization-as-factory does not just linger, deeply etched into the social fabric, it remains the most prominent symbol of how things ought to be done at work. Consultants (and most management theories) attempt to break down a central issue such as leadership, team work, or innovation into discrete bits and create systems to improve those bits.

Consultants are equipped with a variety of instruments to measure and classify people, establish how they fit the organization and determine whether these parts will work together. They design performance-based pay structures and training programs to improve people's effectiveness and efficiency. They offer advice on how to administer performance evaluations, so that employees can get proper feedback and, if necessary, can raise their work from "acceptable" to "superior" and perhaps receive a pay increase as well. The consultant's job is to understand the organizational machine as well as possible, to find the bits that are out of alignment and to take appropriate steps to realign them (through training, restructuring, etc.).

The factory metaphor breaks down the complex organization into pieces that can be managed and manipulated, polished and honed. It makes it possible to design interventions that go after particular outcomes. We can master the zation and make changes to it. Over the years we have developed countless tools, processes, and measures to help us with this task. With the science of management, the zation became king. The only problem is that this focus does not actually work. The zation, to which everyone feels so attached, is (like the emperor) looking increasingly naked.

## The Once and Future Zing

Zing is the activities, the doing, that keep people occupied every day at work. Zing is the finance group hammering out the fourth quarter budget; the project management team meeting to review progress on the first phase; the morning briefing of the 3rd precinct patrol squad; the shift change in the pre-natal wing; and the "crisis meeting" the client has called to review the terms of the contract.

Zing is the *process* of getting things (i.e., work) done and sharing knowledge: What happened on the last shift? Why is the client unhappy with the training that has been done? What were her expectations? How are people responding to the directive from head office about the restructuring? It is intensely social because it is about interacting with one another: talking, listening, squabbling, bickering, and joking on the phone, in motor cars, around lunch tables, in meetings, in offices and corridors, by e-mail and faxes.

*Journal of Practical Consulting*, Vol. 3 Iss. 1, 2008, pp. 7-18

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Zing, the motion of work, has always been there, but it has been hidden by the ideology of science, which does not do a good job of measuring things in motion. Now, because of a deep shift in Western thought and how people see the world, there is an opportunity to rediscover zing. If you look at a workplace through the eyes of those inside it – people with different interests, positions, responsibilities, and commitments – it becomes very hard to believe that you can say much of anything that has a zation-wide scope.

## Zation to Zing is a Big Leap

Zing offers the possibility of new courses of action, including new approaches to old concerns, like improving the way organizations function. That is the light. The shadow of zing is that when you see things differently, it is difficult to hold onto beliefs and practices (e.g., management practices) you took for granted and accepted unquestioningly. For example, the organization, which once seemed real, turns out to have no substance. Where is that structure in organizations, except in the org chart on a printed page? Where is *Microsoft*, the *Department of Defense*, or the *American Psychological Association*? They are names above a door, in newspaper articles and on legal documents. Who is responsible? Who is accountable? Ask questions like these and the nature and purpose of organizational consulting begins to look very different. What is the possibility of whole systems change? Is any one person capable of managing change? Who actually owns the vision statement that is attributed to the organization? Why work at the top if that is only one place where people are organizing?

Consultants trained to see things through the zation lens with toolkits that equip them to deal with the zation problems, are likely to find the terrain of zing strange, even hostile. Jennifer's tale at the beginning of this article is about the consultant who, no doubt swayed by her client's perspectives and wishes, starts down the path of trying to fix the zation, but along the way discovers that the issues have to do with zing. Consultants start with the zation because they don't know any other way to begin. There is another way, strange and unfamiliar, and it requires reshaping what we think of as our own work as well as the work of our clients.

## Where to Begin With Zing?

Practice is what people do. Wenger (2004) described practice as "the body of knowledge, methods, tools, which [people] share and develop together" (p. 3), which tells us that practice is social. People get things done by engaging one another. Their relationships matter. They make meaning together (about what is going on, what they ought to be doing, and who should be involved) and in the process, they share knowledge and learn from each other. In other words, they organize.



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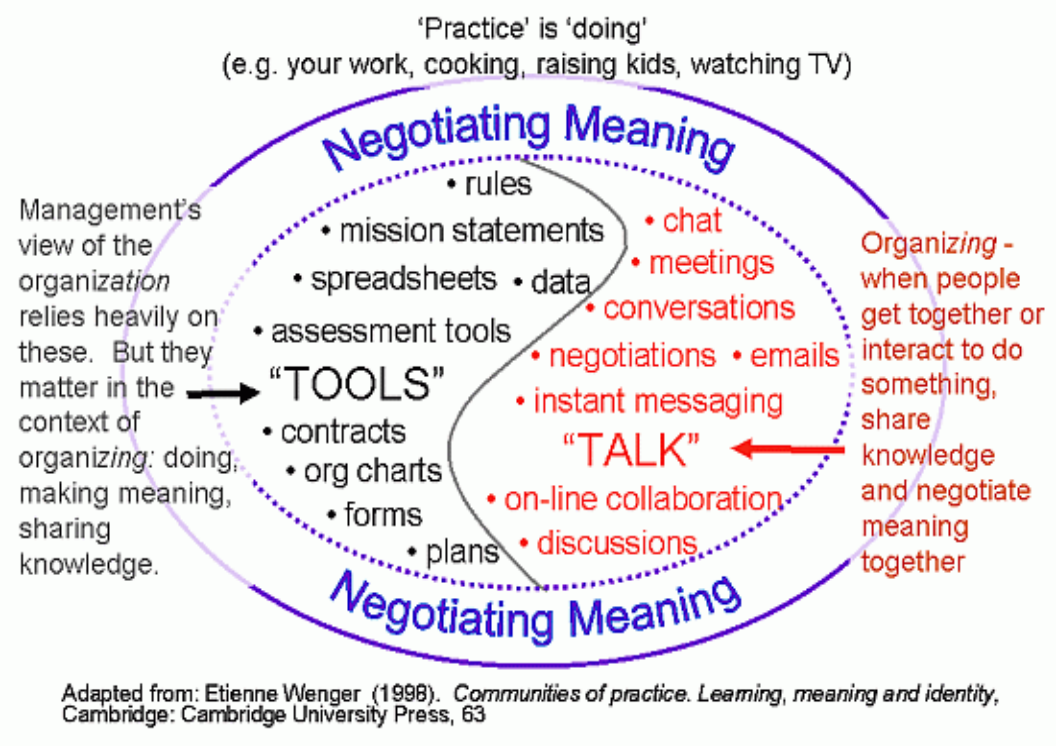


*Figure 1.* A view of practice: how people do work.

Suppose you are a doctor, teacher, marketing consultant, or realtor. While you are doing your work, whatever it happens to be, you will be interacting and talking to others. This is the "talk" part of practice (and of organizing). You engage other people in conversation. Along the way, you will also create "tools" to help you to work together. For example, doctors take notes, teachers draft schedules and marketing consultants create campaign mock-ups. Talk and tools are complementary and largely inseparable. When you realize this, there is something strangely ironic about consulting practices. Consultants, who could be seen as purveyors of practices, are myopic about practice. They do not see the importance of talk, the element that is the heart of practice. When people connect with one another, ask questions, tell stories, make jokes or try to explain their problems, their interactions create an invisible, fluid web of conversations. The web of conversations is the space of zing; the place in which people organize. If you were looking for the sources of zing, you would find them in their conversations. Yet conversations are generally outside the scope of consulting engagements.

Both consultants and managers prefer to focus on tools. Consulting practice is reflected in a maxims such as, "what gets measured gets done," which tells only half of the story of practice. Are professionals oblivious to their own organizing activities, unaware of how their relationships, conversations, and other interactions play out in their own work? More than 20 years ago, Donald Schön posed questions similar to these in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). We are still waiting for professionals to take note. This may be why, when working with their clients, consultants are continually drawn to and led astray by the zation and the tools (restructuring, reengineering, and IT systems "to improve the transfer of data"), but they often seem oblivious to talk (conversations) and the zing.



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## Mistaking Zing for the Zation: A Case Study

Being led astray by the zation is very common. To illustrate the problem, consider the *re*organi*zation* of a variety of United States federal government departments and agencies into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which began in 2002. This is a particularly striking example of how advisors and consultants rush to the zation, when they see problems like breakdowns in security or communication. When you understand the distinction between zing and the zation, you begin to realize that working on the zation is not going to solve those sorts of problems.

The DHS was created after official investigations identified "security failures" in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. A document titled, "Department of Homeland Security," issued by President George Bush in June, 2002 says:

> Responsibilities for homeland security are dispersed among more than 100 different government organizations. America needs a single, unified homeland security *structure*…. [and t]he President proposes … the most significant transformation of the U.S. government in over half-century by largely *transforming and realigning* the current confusing patchwork of government activities *into a single department*… (emphasis added, p. 1)

The real puzzle is why anyone would think that amalgamating a number of huge hierarchical bureaucracies, with all the problems that come with complex zations, could streamline security, produce better communication and gain responsiveness, agility and accountability? Agility and accountability do not describe the zation (e.g., structures); they are about interactions, hence zing. In fact, everything you might consider a "security issue" ultimately has to do with zing; yet the most visible (and costly) response was *re*organi*zation* on a vast scale.

When we talk about "failures of communication," we include people's unwillingness or inability (for all sorts of different reasons) to share information. Perhaps they needed to interact with others in a different organization or even in the same organization who were not part of their reporting structure. "Boundaries to communication" do not arise simply because organizations have different names or different divisions. People may readily share knowledge within the same or between different organizations, if their relationships are collegial, if they are friendly, care for each other, have shared interests and speak the same language. On the other hand, if they are strangers, rivals (because they are competing with each other) or if there is animosity between them, they probably will not cooperate. It all depends on people's relationships or their attitudes towards one another.

Things go wrong in zing when people do not cooperate or collaborate because of bad relationships: a lack of trust, an absence of commitment or simple fear that they will lose their jobs if they do not do exactly what they are told. To understand what is going on, to make meaning of breakdowns, a consultant has to pay attention to people's relationships, to the meanings they attribute to their relationships and what is going on underneath, beneath the surface of those relationships. Knowing that people's relationships matter, not as the "soft stuff" that gets in the way, but as the core work that needs to get done, invites you to ask questions that have to do with our social needs, commitment, responsibility, care, accountability and trust.

*Journal of Practical Consulting*, Vol. 3 Iss. 1, 2008, pp. 7-18

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

How does the consultant's tool box measure up to the challenges of zing? Organizing is practice; you cannot "reorganize" by redrawing the org chart, unless you treat relationships as your main responsibility. You cannot address communication breakdowns by purchasing an online collaborative tool, without understanding whether and why the people involved are unwilling to talk openly and share knowledge. The tools themselves never get to the problems of zing.

From this standpoint, consultants' preoccupation with things like org charts, software tools or process maps, is problematic when it distracts from the zing factors of people, their purposes, perspectives and attitudes to one another. That preoccupation mirrors the perspectives of people at the top "in charge" of organizations, whose roles and responsibilities revolve around the sustenance and protection of the zation. Of course, these leaders hire or approve the hiring of consultants and that makes the shift from the zation to zing more difficult, but still just as necessary. Otherwise, you are like the man who loses his car keys in a dark parking lot, but prefers to look for them under the nearest street light because he can see better there. The zation may be illuminating, but it is illuminating *things* that do not matter much for knowledge work, not *practices* that do.

## Consultants, Are You Ready For Zing?

Contemplating a change in consulting practices of the sort we have in mind, where you shift attention from the zation to zing, is an enormous leap that involves more than just retooling. In consulting, like all knowledge work, relationships matter. The way you show up is at least as important as the tools and techniques you have mastered. Your presence depends on your experience and the perspectives and approaches you bring, the way you talk to your clients about organizations and management and the way you engage other people. Becoming a zing-consultant is not primarily an intellectual accomplishment that involves learning new concepts. It involves a new presence, a different way of being in relationship with other people.

As a zation consultant, whether you are aware of it or not, you show up in a certain way, as an expert-cum-problem-solver. When they hire a consultant, this is what most clients expect to get, because it is the image of consulting that the profession has cultivated. On the one hand, it is going to be difficult to break this mould. On the other, there is a compelling practical reason for wanting to do so. The reason is that consultants are often expected to solve extremely tough problems (see Kahane, 2004), which managers may believe are beyond their abilities and which is why they hired the consultant in the first place.

If all the problems we encountered in organizations were like fixing a car that will not start, the expert-cum-problem-solver image would take consultants a long way. Fixing a car is a "tame problem." Fixing homeland security is not; it is a "wicked" one and, according to Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973) who coined the distinction, wicked problems cannot be solved by experts. It is easy to see why if we go back to Jennifer's real problem, the animosity between two coworkers, which was a zing issue and a wicked problem. There are a few steps Jennifer or her client could have taken to solve the problem. One would have been to fire either or both of the people involved; or to send one to an overseas division, with the hope that he will get on with his coworkers there. As long as the two are working together, however, the problem will persist, unless their relationship changes. Jennifer could have worked with them on their relationship, coaching them either individually or together. The problem, however, (like with all zing



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problems) is in the way people interact and whether it is resolved depends on the people themselves.

Organizational issues are wicked problems, whether they are big (like homeland security) or small (like Jennifer's discovery of the troubles caused by personal animosities). Zation-oriented, problem-solving approaches will not resolve those problems; at least not in the sense of "making the problem go away." Yet consultants are still hired to deliver solutions. Leaders expect their advisors to have answers. What is a consultant to do? What might she offer? Here is a simple framework for practicing zing-consulting.

## A Framework for Practicing Zing-Consulting

The first thing she might offer is a new perspective. That may sound wishy-washy but, given the complexity of the issues they are dealing with and the fact that their zation lenses lend themselves to myopia, having access to new zing perspectives on problems (and remember that is not the same as offering solutions) can be a revelation to their clients. It may be the most important thing consultants can do for their clients. Initially, this is not what clients will expect, but no matter what they might believe, while the zation is the focus of consulting interventions, they are not getting solutions anyway, only temporary fixes at best (the DHS reorganization is a sobering reminder of this). It is important that everyone begin to understand that the predicament is dealing with complex zing problems. To resolve those, you deal with the issues where they arise and focus on how people organize. It does not help to pretend that someone somewhere possesses magic that can make the whole zation better.

The work of dealing with zing problems is in making meaning of the wicked problem, with whoever has a stake in it and can influence the outcome. So the second thing a zing-consultant might do is to identify the stakeholders and broaden the range of constituents who will participate with her in resolving the issues. To do this she will have to get permission from her clients to broaden the scope of the consulting engagement, sometimes to include people outside the organization itself, because zing problems do not fall neatly into departments or divisions or even organizations. Zing is based on social networks and relationships and those do not observe formal boundaries. When people organize across formal boundaries like departmental ones, consulting practices have to cross them too. In our experience, your efforts to open up the consulting engagement, to work with a larger number of constituents, usually run counter to the prevailing mindset of control. Clients often say, "We don't want too many people to know about the problem." If the client's view is that only a few people need to be involved, but the issue looks bigger, you will have to persuade him to see things differently.

A third, crucial repositioning for the zing consultant is in seeing that consulting involves working *with*, not for, the client. The Latin root of the word "consult" means "counsel." Although we talk a good deal about consulting relationships, much of today's management and organizational consulting work is best described as a transaction, not a relationship. The problem-solving zation orientation lends itself to transactions-based practice. "You sell us a solution; we pay you for it." You might just as well be selling donuts or shoes. Zing-consulting is mostly about making meaning of the problem and that demands a reflective approach. The zing-consultant has to develop and negotiate non-standard consulting contracts oriented to building and sustaining the client-consultant relationship, rather than to delivering a specific product by a given date.



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Something that may not be obvious is that when the heart of your consulting practice is a meaning-making relationship, rather than a problem-solving transaction, the consultant has relinquished the power that is implicit in the claim that, "I can solve your problem if you pay my fee." Which is why, as we have noted, when you consult with zing, you show up differently; open to learning rather than having the answers.

## Conclusion

What it all comes down to is that a new perspective on the work we do might change the way we work, which might in turn, change the way we help our clients. As the world gets more complex and people in organizations are asked to do more and more knowledge work, people inside those organizations need to change. That means that we as consultants, need to change what we offer to our clients. A focus on zing, sitting next to our more standard focus on the zation, offers us a whole new way to view those problems we are most often called in to help solve. It allows us to resist the calls to "fix" problems we know are too wicked to fix and to show our clients a new way to think about the work they do (as we ourselves are doing our work in a new way).

We offer ideas to help you begin to move in this direction, but what is really required is that you tilt your head just slightly to change the view that you see. Paying attention to people and the work they do allows new questions, new actions and new hope for consultants who are tired of walking away from organizations, knowing that they have not done what they set out to do or that the solutions offered will never be well implemented. We all want to be better at what we do, because what we do is critically important to our clients and to the world those clients live in. Feeling more successful and making a bigger difference might help us put the zing back into consulting after all.

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*Journal of Practical Consulting*, Vol. 3 Iss. 1, 2008, pp. 7-18

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

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ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu