

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS CONSULTATION IN THE AGE OF AGILITY: Reflections on the Critical Facilitation of Agile Functioning in Organizations

To My Students

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This short article addresses the simple question of “what kind of consultant would you like to be in your life?” It gives the reader four choices, in the order of increasing complexity paradoxically accompanied by decreasing levels of responsibility (although not acuity). See for yourself.

Most companies striving to reach organizational ‘agility’ employ consultants and coaches to help them achieve their ideological goal. Many consulting firms now specialize in ‘agility consulting’. The time has come to clarify what distinguishes behavioral from developmental consulting, and what are the differences between behavioral and developmental process consultation in consulting.

According to E. Schein, it makes sense to distinguish three forms of consultation which he named:

- The expert model (of consulting)
- The doctor/patient model of consulting
- The process consultation model of consulting.

I refer to the first two as ‘conventional’, and to the last one as either ‘behavioral’ or ‘developmental’. The crucial difference between these four forms of consulting lies in how the consultant’s professional responsibility is defined and what tools they master to live up to their chosen responsibility:

- In the *expert model*, the consultant has sole responsibility for the outcomes of his/her intervention
- In the *doctor/patient model*, the responsibility is shared between the consultant as ‘doctor’ and the client as ‘patient’, with the assumption that the consultant/doctor ‘knows more’ or ‘knows better’ than the client/patient.
- In the *process consultation model (PC)*, the responsibility for the outcome of the consultant’s intervention is entirely that of the client, not the consultant. This is the case since the consultant’s interventions aim to consult to the client’s “mental process” (seen behaviorally), i.e., are based on an understanding of the consultant of “how the real world works in the eyes of the client”.

While in behavioral PC, “how the real world works” for both consultant and client is a matter of observation and inference, in developmental PC it is for both consultant and client a matter of “how the real world is being constructed social-emotionally and cognitively through dialogue in real time”, in the sense of CDF, the *Constructive Developmental Framework (CDF)*.

Consequently, the move from behavioral to developmental PC is one from behavioral to adult-developmental thinking, and from the tools of the former to those of the latter. Accordingly, the move from being a behavioral process consultant to working as a developmentally educated and practicing one is a move to a different set of tools and procedures. Developmental tools in CDF, called ‘social-

emotional and cognitive *prompts*, do not supersede but enrich behavioral tools, with the understanding that 'behavior' is developmentally grounded and not a result of accumulated learning and experience.

In short, both Schein and Laske leave behind *conventional* notions of consultation. They redefine professional responsibility in consulting as resting with the client or client group alone. This shifting of responsibility to the side of the client is balanced through an increased demand for professionalism on the side of consultants, specifically the stipulation that the DPC consultant needs to be centrally focused on the client's *mental processing* (movements-in-thought in real time), not this or that procedure or schema or set of abstractions adopted or desired by the client. The developmental PC-consultant's sole responsibility specifically is to help clients arrive at a deeper understanding of their (own) personal and organizational meaning- and sense-making, by way of demonstrating that organizational culture is rooted in, and held together by, every participant's developmentally grounded 'world view' (Frame of Reference).

What does this stipulation of professional PDC responsibilities concretely amount to?

In the age of agility ideologies, now rampant, it amounts to giving up the *spectator view* of agility (and thus of knowledge) and to replacing it with a *constructivist* view of both. In terms of developmental procedures, this amounts to needing a mastery in decoding how, in each particular case and team, clients come to answer two fundamental questions, both for themselves and for others:

1. The social-emotional question 'what should I do and for whom?'
2. The cognitive question 'what can I do, and what (therefore) are my options?'

When one translates these 'Job 2' questions (referring to individuals' developmental history and profile) into practical 'Job 1' questions, that is, into a form closer to actual work delivery required of contributors, the questions to one-self, above, take the form:

1. Is my internal social-emotional positioning toward co-workers and team members instrumentalist, other-dependent, or self-authoring?
2. Does my cognitive capability lie in phase 1, 2, 3, or 4 of adult development?

When these issues are further operationalized into the organizational surround of work in terms of a 'role-taking model', these issues become *fused* into the single question:

1. In terms of accountability to others in my work, is the size of my role (in terms of its accountability to others and the organization) commensurate with the size of my developmental resources, or 'size of person'?

In terms of a *role-making* rather than a *role-taking* model in which role commitments are settled flexibly in terms of high-quality team dialogue [differing in three levels of work complexity] (De Visch & Laske 2020, 108), this question assumes the following meaning and form:

1. In a team dialogue about members' role, regardless of whether guided by a critical facilitator or not, am I able to have enough agility of thinking and social bonding that my team can reach a flexible consensus as to what is the adaptable scope of my work as a

function of the work of others in the team (within a particular time window in which Job 1 work needs to get done)?.

It is at this point that *the PDC practitioner*, as a critical facilitator, needs to come in to decode the question (back) into its two separate forms formulated along procedural lines, one social-emotional and the other cognitive:

1. How do I assess whether a team member's social-emotional agility – consisting of different degrees of self-awareness of my own accountability relative to others – is commensurate with the role the team has *made* him or her, and if not, how can I help individual team members develop a full awareness of that situation and its practical consequences?
2. How can I assess whether a team member's cognitive agility – consisting of different levels of complexity of thinking (in terms of DTF, the Dialectical Thought Form Framework) -- is commensurate with the role the team has *made* for him or her, and if not, how can I assist individual team members in developing a full awareness of that situation and its practical consequences?

In these formulations 'agility' is acknowledged as rooted in the transformational capability of team members, -- not bottled up in heaps of abstract vocabularies imported from the outside, nor in single individuals or 'functions' defined by lists of activities that remain external to team members. **It is exactly this 'twist' in formulating issues in a developmental form that distinguishes the behavioral from the developmental PC practitioner (who has learned to ask and answer the two questions above in repeatedly undertaken developmental case studies).**

In short, in order to work successfully, DPC consultants must re-think the opaque and logically dense body of abstractions that define the ideology of organizational agility. Since this ideology is typically imported from outside the organization, they must help clients to understand that the conventional notion of 'agility embodies a 'spectator view' of agility as something "out there", and therefore poses severe obstacles to his/her achievement of personal and organizational agility. In most cases, the consultant's task largely becomes that of revealing the burden the client is heaping on himself in the form of a huge mountain of logical abstractions that do nothing but cripple attempts to achieve internal agility.

What is more, since the ideology of 'agile' functioning resides at the level of Schein's expert model or at best doctor/patient model, thus far removed from process consultation, whether behavioral or developmental, the consultant must take on getting across to the client the notion of his/her work not primarily as an "implementation of agility schemes" (of whatever nature), but as a "consultation to clients' mental process", which is the crux of becoming 'agile'. **In short, DPC consultants must turn from implementors and designers of abstract ideologies of Agile to *organizational epistemologists*, thus treating organizational engagements as *CDF case studies*.**

The issue of what is the consultant's and what is the client's responsibility in consultations for agility is a function of how close the client has already moved toward becoming at least behaviorally agile. In such an advanced state of agility, the new procedures introduced (such as stand-up meetings and scrum teams) in themselves represent new issues to which developmental scrutiny can be brought to bear, in

fact should be brought to bear to avoid illusory (not developmentally grounded) gains. The more behaviorally agile a client already is, the easier it becomes for consultants to instill developmental scrutiny to the mental processing that keeps the agility achieved in place. Unfortunately however, the notion of mental processing as the root of an organization's culture is often entirely missed by agile consultants simply because they are in most cases not schooled in thinking adult-developmentally, and thus are not 'in the know' about what developmentally constitutes agility.

To sum up, consulting for agility – often extended to consulting for culture transformation – is mired in the illusion that agility is achievable without the transformation of meaning- and sense-making of organization members. This illusion is rooted in focusing on Job 1 (the work to be done) alone, and neglecting its close association with Job 2 (the individual's own developmental job for doing the work Job 1 consists of). As a result, a '*spectator view of agility*' as something "out there" prevails and is strengthened with every 'best practice' model of agility that is imported into the organization from the outside. **Importing models of agility from the outside of an organization becomes a tool of a self-induced infection of the organizational body with the 'agile' virus that do cure than falls to practitioners of DPC.**

In this constellation of client-consultant mindsets, what should a responsible developmental process consultant do, especially if s(he) has experienced the limits of behavioral PC?

Clearly, what can be done to facilitate an organization's journey toward agility will depend on the developmental level of the consultant or consultant group in the sense of both its quality of sense- and meaning making. This quality will determine HOW PDC consultants will conceive of their mandate when approached by clients. To the extent that they simply take over the client's expectably strictly behavioristic agenda, they will find it hard to introduce developmental process consultation through the backdoor, as an after-thought. Therefore, the more successful PC consultations will result from alerting the client upfront that the agility interventions offered are not of the conventional ilk but require a rethinking of agility by the client before interventions can even begin. In other words, PDC interventions cannot be dictated by some kind of "transformation office" staffed with people ignorant of PDC. Therefore, PDC should be part of the initial offer, rather than an appendix or afterthought. Such an offer can be crafted by following the sequence of questions #1 and #2 above.

Furthermore, what might be an optimal way for PDC consultants to 'inoculate' an organizational body infected with behavioristic notions of agility ('the agility syndrome') with *mental processing medications*? In this regard much depends on whether these PC medications are merely imported from the outside (as agile ideologies are) or whether they are actually "embodied" in carefully deliberated and worked-out interventions that specify how the agility-diseased client body will be approach. (The adoption of the disease model here is not meant to reinforce the doctor/patient model of consulting mentioned above since, as said, it excludes any awareness of mental process and its required scrutiny.)

In simple terms, it becomes the task of the consultant, to help clients understand that agility is not an entity, substance, or even goal or mission but *a mindset to be obtained* (rather than imported from the outside), and that therefore 'being' or 'becoming' agile is something that starts with one's own mental

processing, emotional and cognitive, right here and now (in real time), and differently from team to team (rather than in a globalized scenario thought to be applicable to an entire organization).

Consultants must clarify for the client that ‘agility’ is foremost a *state of mind*, not simply an end state of organizational processes. It is decidedly a trajectory toward a goal, a path that one cannot abstract from which is rather the essence of what is to be obtained. Agility can’t be achieved without inquiring into the roots of one’s own present lack of agility in social-emotional and cognitive terms, and into what hinders agility to emerge in oneself, which is both an emotional and cognitive issue having to do with how everybody interprets the ‘real world’, including the meaning of ‘agility’ itself to begin with.

Consultants themselves must be mature and educated enough developmentally, to move away from any kind of ‘*spectator view*’ of *agility* (as if it were something outside of him or her). They have to be coached to leave behind all, or most, pre-meditated ‘practices’ and ‘schemes’ since they are abstractions that may not apply to a specific client’s situation. In short, the notion of agility needs to be re-generated in the specific context of the client, letting go of seeing it as a predefined, prefabricated solution for all, rather than one specific to the client at a specific point in time (which will surely change over time if it is not already anachronistic).

Why is this a challenging undertaking?

Most organizational clients are unaware that the logical categories implicit or explicit in the ideology (now pandemic) of agility are not directly part of the real world, nor do they describe how the real world works, but are rather being imposed on the real world by insufficiently agile (dialectical) design thinking. Their ‘spectator view’ of knowledge as well as of their own activity – seen as something ‘out there’ rather than ‘in here’ – is an obstacle they bring into play unconsciously themselves and therefore get caught in.

It is only when letting go of spectator views of the world which are rampant and now coded as *algorithms* that process consultation, whether behavioral (PD) or developmental (DPC), can begin. In a first step, one might be able to omit the adult-developmental dimension of process consultation, working with Schein’s model of PC rather than with CDF. But not for long. It will soon become apparent that the obstacles to organizational agility are not simply behavioral, motivational, or psychological or even structural ones, but are themselves grounded in differences of levels of meaning- and sense making in the human mind and a lack of social-emotional and cognitive maturity to boot.