

Consulting

The relationship with the client

If we consider the relationship between consultant and client in terms of who knows best how to exercise design control over the solution to the client's problem¹, then the following diagram identifies four possibilities:

		Client	
		knows	doesn't know
Consultant	knows	expert	guru
	doesn't know	outworker	critical process

¹ The processes of problem formulation, and of exercising design control over solutions (a 'solution strategy'), correspond to the formation of a *hypothesis* about the nature of what is problematic; and the *elaboration* of that hypothesis in the form of a solution strategy. Hypothesis-and-elaboration are the corollary of each other, in that each implies the other. They exist within a context of something-being-taken-as-being-problematic, and its corollary of observable-symptoms-to-be-ameliorated. 'Dilemmas' are a way of formulating the nature of what is taken as being problematic.

Dilemmas aim at formulating the fundamental problematics faced by an organisation. The origins of this approach to dilemmas lie with the Milan method, and the work by Cronen, Pearce and Tomm in elaborating the Systemic Epistemology with which they worked. The dilemma is, in their terms, a strange loop (Toward an Explanation of How the Milan Method Works: An invitation to a Systemic Epistemology and the Evolution of Family Systems in Campbell & Draper (eds) "Applications of Systemic Family Therapy: The Milan Approach" Grune & Stratton 1985. pp69-84.)

These strange loops have the characteristics of the moebius strip, and their effects are further elaborated in Charting the Corporate Mind: from Dilemma to Strategy, by Charles Hampden-Turner. Blackwell 1990.

The elaboration of these dilemmas in terms of the *impossibility* around which they move is a way of formulating the dilemma in terms of alternative themes/strategies which offer alternative resolutions of the *point of diffraction* which is the impossibility. This is a Lacanian 'take' on Foucault which is rooted in Lacan's formulation of the *drive* and *fundamental phantasy*.

In the outworker relationship, the client knows what the problem is, is exercising design control over how to solve the problem, and is buying the capability from the consultant. This is a c-type relationship².

In the expert relationship, both parties know how to exercise design control, but we must assume that the consultant can do a better job than the client. If not, then it will collapse back into the outworker relationship. This expert relationship offers the whole range of possibilities from low-level through to high-level K-type³, depending on the sophistication of the client (and consultant).⁴

In the guru relationship, the client doesn't know what the problem is, and the consultant does. The big accounting and consulting firms tend to work in this way, relying on the dependent nature of senior Board relationships to secure the business. Having secured the business, models and frameworks get used which enable more junior staff/outworkers to do the job. It is therefore often possible for the client to end up feeling that he has provided on-the-job training for a lot of outworkers from the consulting firm, and that the wrong problem has been solved. Given, however, that the guru consultant has defined the right problem in the right way, this still leaves the problem of "implementation". The client system has to learn what the consultant knows if it is to take responsibility for sustaining the solution without the consultant's continuing support.

The fourth 'critical process' relationship is one where the nature of the problem is not understood, where there is an explicit learning process, and in which both parties have to work together to develop effective ways of defining the problem before it can be solved. This is the P-type relationship⁵ in which the expertise which the consultant brings is in the problem-defining and problem-solving process itself. The value of this position to the client lies in the joint learning which is going on. What brings the client and consultant together, therefore, is the problematic nature of the problem domain. It is skill

² "c-type" stands for capability-type. A c-type relationship is one in which the customer exercises design control over how a capability is used.

³ "K-type" stands for Knowledge-type. 'Knowledge is knowledge of how to exercise design control in a given Knowledge Domain. In a K-type relationship, the customer defines the problem, but the provider retains design control over how the problem is solved.

⁴ *Strategy ceiling* is a concept used to describe the level at which a client is able to consider propositions. The higher the strategy ceiling in the client system, the higher the level at which the client is able to consider changes in the way design control is exercised over the activities of the business. Being able to intervene on the level of the strategy ceiling in the client system is a key skill in creating demand for propositions.

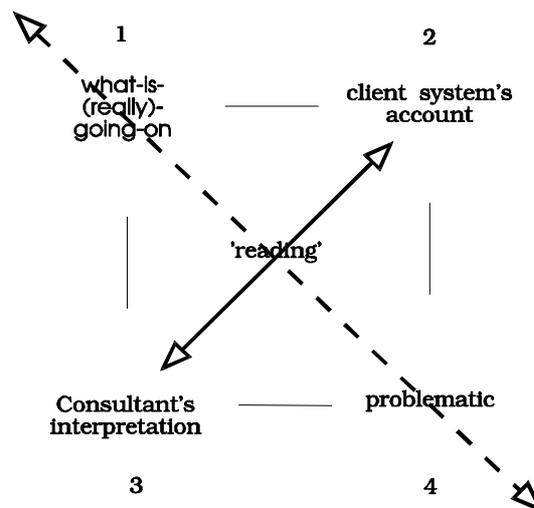
⁵ "P-type" stands for Problem-type. The client's relation to its context is a problem domain, in which there are different ways of structuring the problems faced in that domain, depending on how the nature of what is problematic in that domain is defined. In a P-type relationship the provider works in alliance with the client to develop 'better' ways of structuring the problem domain.

in rendering this problematic nature tractable to cost-effective solutions which the consultant brings to this relationship.⁶

So what? We have to compete with the big consulting firms. And the big consulting firms tend to work on the guru-outworker axis. This biases them towards positional strategies, although their cost structures and scale almost demands that they compete in this way.⁷ The competitive challenge can be understood, therefore, in terms of the way the consultant develops his customer relationships on this other axis, working with customer/clients to add value to their businesses.⁸

Critical Process

The schema below describes the relation between the conversational axis of account and interpretation, and the other axis representing the relation between the what-is-going-on and its problematic nature. In a consultation with a client, this other axis remains mediated by the consultant who brings it to bear on the client's situation through the client-consultant relationship. A 'critical process' is a consulting process which enables the client to develop its own relation to this other axis.



⁶ One way of understanding what is meant by "the problematic nature of problem domains" is in terms of dilemmas. See *Charting the Corporate Mind: from dilemma to strategy*. Charles Hamden-Turner. Blackwell 1990.

⁷ This is the axis which Illich problematises in his book on disabling professionals. It is an 'axis' in the sense that there is an asymmetry between provider and client in who knows and who doesn't. The issue here is the extent to which this axis gets institutionalised in the interests of particular forms of knowledge.

⁸ On this other axis, both provider and client can agree to agree what the problem is in the interests of getting it solved; or to open it up to critical examination because of its problematic nature. On this other axis, the efficacy of knowledge itself is taken as being problematic.

Critical process is the necessary condition for organisational learning⁹. This 'shows' in the relationship the client has to its organisation as something mediating consensus-for-action. The 'object' of critical process is what is problematic in the way this organisation mediates what-is-going-on.¹⁰

- Guru, Guru, what should I do?

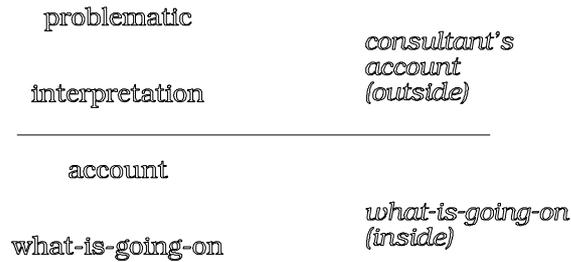
The client always starts off from a position of being in his reality in a way that does not problematise his relation to that reality. At this stage, the client + his reality represents for the consultant a what-is-going-on about which he (the consultant) is trying to construct an account. In the client's eyes, this places the consultant outside, and the client inside.¹¹ Arriving at an explanation on the basis of this relationship will do no more than establish an 'expert' or 'guru' style relationship between the client and the consultant, depending on the nature of the consultant's position. Either way, the client is assuming a general body of knowledge 'out there' about how to solve his problem. Without an overall contract to develop 'critical process', this will lead to the consultant being asked to provide the solution to the problem which the client will then set about implementing.

⁹"Organisation" is here being taken as mediating consensus-for-action - the third 'leg' defining the strategy ceiling, the other two being the individual's capacity and the job requirement. This concept of organisation views organisation as a 'discursive practice'. (See GOWG working papers on Schein, Checkland, Maturana and Foucault to see more of the development of this way of approaching organisation).

¹⁰Compare this definition of the 'object' with David Armstrong's in his paper *The analytic object in organisational work*: "emotional experiences resonances set up in the inner world of the client, which I have come to see as the meaning of the 'organisation-in-the-mind'. Not the client's mental construct of the organisation, but rather the emotional reality of the organisation that is registered in him or her, that is infecting him or her, that can be owned or disowned, displaced or projected, denied, scotomised: that can also be known but unthought."

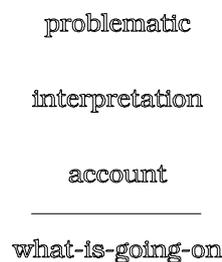
In Lacanian terms, these emotional experiences would be characteristics of (secondary) fantasies; primary (fundamental) phantasy only being approachable through the fundamental problematics which the organisation presents/is an articulation of. Although Armstrong is addressing the effects of the organisation as a symbolisation strategy (discursive formation) which has effects on the ways in which anxiety is contained, and therefore on the ways in which it is not, it is these (secondary) effects which are being taken as the object, rather than an object arising from the inherently problematic nature of symbolisation itself (See GOWG working paper critiquing *The Unconscious at Work* (30th December 1994), and the question of the third dilemma [retreat vs return of the origin] as distinct from the second dilemma ['cogito' vs unthought]).

¹¹This arises as a result of an 'imagarising' of the organisation - roughly, the organisation is what you see. The shift to a critical process depends on the organisation becoming understood as a discursive practice - a way of speaking-and-listening - which is itself a response to the problematics it is encountering (and/or has encountered).



- Circular questioning

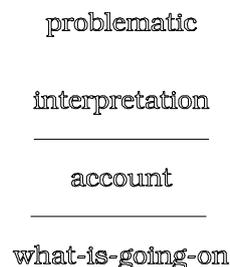
A process of circular questioning, in which different members of the client system are asked to speak about their experience not only of the business, but also of each others' views of it, begins to problematise the way in which that reality 'presents' itself to the client.



This way of understanding circular process is very much in terms of working with a group of people. When applied on a wider scale, it involves examining the nature of the data being used within the organisation, and seeking to arrive at some agreement over the architecture of this data.¹² This often means coming into conflict with professional or functional vested interests, which have 'colonised' how data is defined in the interests of their particular ways of accounting for performance.

- Gathering the client

Once the client has problematised the nature of his reality, then 'gathering' the client involves helping the client to formulate an explanation/account of



it.

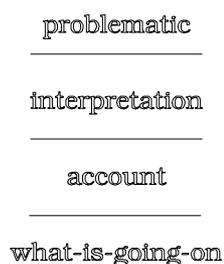
This is where some kind of strategy process is needed which enables the client to 'make sense' of the data. In effect, the client is being asked to

¹² The techniques of analysis associated with analysing data architectures, and the whole question of the architecture of the information environment, represents an approach to organisations defined by PAN - Projective Analysis.

develop 'joined-up thinking' about the positioning of the organisation. This involves introducing into the organisation ways of thinking about the identity of the organisation as viewed by an outside observer, and the competitive viability/sustainability of such an account.

- Parenthesising the client's account

'Parenthesising' the client's account involves enabling the client to see that his explanation/account involves assuming a particular form of interpretation amongst other possible forms of explanation. This will mean that the client has some way of questioning whether or not it is the 'right' way of interpreting.



When applied to a whole client system, this 'parenthesising' amounts to assuming a relational approach to strategy. 'Right' ways are always relative to a (problematic) interpretation of what the client wants.¹³

- Critical process as orthogonality

'Parenthesising' raises the question of whether or not the way of interpreting is appropriate or not. If this question of appropriateness is not to be resolved by reference to some 'right way' which the consultant is in some way privy to, it has to be worked through by means of a critical process which addresses the specifics of the client's own situation and holds this question open.¹⁴ This means holding a relation to the problematic nature of what-is-going-on which involves being orthogonal to any supposed right way, however parenthesised it is.¹⁵

¹³ 'Gathering' the client through a strategy process is therefore sufficient to establish a positional strategy, and 'parenthesising' is the corollary of the relational strategy. This equivalencing of certain kinds of inter-personal dynamics and certain structural characteristics of the organisation is approached through *Freud's Project and topologising organisation* (GOWG working paper July 1995).

¹⁴ The approach to this is through understanding the fundamental dilemmas which the organisation faces... and the problematic facing the organisation of how to be in relation to these dilemmas.

¹⁵ This raises issues for the consultant around the architecture of his business, and whether or not it can support this kind of stance in relation to his clients. This applies equally to the client organisation and its architecture insofar as it too is seeking to pursue a relational strategy. The name for this different kind of architecture is K-type (as distinct to r-type). Essentially, a K-type architecture enables the client system to organise itself around the needs of its clients; whereas an r-type architecture is concerned to replicate a particular (ideal) relation to clients reflecting the supplier's own views of what the customer needs. (*Performative Organisation, Are customers an endangered species?* In draft with Robin Wensley.)

If this is taking place within the context of an overall 'contract' to develop critical process, then the client will 'buy into' the notion that his key leadership skill relates to enabling such a critical process - to working a critical process.¹⁶ If it is not, then the leadership will try to embody the 'right way' itself, leading to a collapse in the critical process. Thus both the consultant and the client leadership face the challenge of being orthogonal.¹⁷

Postscript on “orthogonality”

The origin for me of the concept of orthogonality came from Maturana in one of his workshops in which he was working to develop the Milan group's ideas. He defined orthogonality literally as being at right-angles, and used it to refer to the therapist's 'coupling' with the client system as never being with the system as a whole, but always in relation to members of the system - a non-intersecting with the system as a whole.

As such it was an alternative to the family therapy notion of *neutrality*¹⁸, given his refusal of this notion because of its dependence on the construction of a meta-level for the therapist. It was difficult for him to develop, however, without developing some form of 3⁰ cybernetics beyond the autopoietic formulations he was translating from his theory of living systems¹⁹. Radical constructivism was as far as he wanted to go!

The particular formulation of orthogonality comes from Lacan's critique of inter-subjectivity.²⁰ Orthogonality - as something more than parenthesis - is the taking up of the impossibility of truth inhering either in the imaginary (inter-subjective) relation, or in an identifying with the Ideal implied by the construction of the system as a whole. Orthogonal in this sense is to be *in* (an organisation) but not *of* (it).²¹

¹⁶ This is the line which *The future of identity* tries to develop (in Boot, Lawrence, Morris (eds) "Creating New Futures: A Manager's Guide to the Unknown" McGraw-Hill 1994.)

¹⁷ In *Meeting the Challenge of the Case* (in Casemore et al (eds) 1994 "What Makes consultancy work - understanding the dynamics" South Bank University Press pp358-371), Barry Palmer and I explore the nature of this challenge through a series of workshops.

¹⁸ *Hypothesising - Circularity - Neutrality: Three guidelines for the Conductor of the Session*. Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, Prata. Family Process March 1980 Vol 19 No 1.

¹⁹ The basic positioning of Maturana's (2⁰ cybernetics) approach in relation to a Soft Systems view, and the bridging of this to the notion of organisations as discursive formations, is in the GOWG working papers on Checkland and Maturana. An earlier attempt to critique the whole 2⁰ systems paradigm is in "Lacan and Maturana: constructivist origins for a 3⁰ Cybernetics" with J.V. Kenny . Communication and Cognition Vol 25. Number 1 pp73-100 1992.

²⁰ See Chapter XIX - Introduction of the big Other in "The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1954-55: The Ego on Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis" Cambridge University Press 1988.

²¹ Derived from St John (via Barry Palmer).

