The Client-Consultant Relationship: Two Perspectives

Two FCSI MAS consultants, John Cornyn and Karen Malody, present provocative "think pieces" on the nature of consulting. What happens when you have to deliver bad news? And what if client-consultant communication in the classic sense is not actually *possible at all?*

By John Cornyn, FCSI, The Cornyn Fasano Group

There is a famous verbal exchange from a play (and then movie released in 1992) written by Aaron Sorkin entitled "A Few Good Men." For those who are unfamiliar with the plot, Lt. Daniel Kaffee, played by Tom Cruise, is assigned to defend two US Marines accused of murdering another soldier while on duty at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. One of the key courtroom scenes in this taut drama occurs when Lt. Kaffee questions Col. Nathan Jessup played by Jack Nicholson. As Lt. Kaffee indelicately confronts a less-than-cordial superior officer, there is this famous exchange (extracted)….

Jessep: You want answers?
Kaffee: I think I'm entitled to them.
Jessep: You want answers?
Kaffee: I want the truth!
Jessep: You can't handle the truth! Son, we live in a world that has walls.

Do we?

Can you picture yourself in a similar situation when asked to brief a superior or a client on a similarly less than pleasant topic? Can they handle the truth?

There is, in most of us, a psychological barrier that inhibits our ability or willingness to confront a client or loved one to deliver bad news or to tell them they need to contemplate major changes. The ability to be open to and to contemplate a comprehensive systemic change is extremely challenging even when there is a fact-supported opportunity to proactively avoid future problems. We live and work in an environment today in which our ability and willingness to confront our clients is even more difficult, but our failure to do so can exacerbate existing problems or even create new ones. The immediate challenge is that a failure to act when most needed can result in one or more unwelcome career changes.

There is an inexplicable resistance to challenging the status quo even in minor ways, much less to actually contemplate making major changes.

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.

- John F. Kennedy

As foodservice management and design consultants, do we have a professional and ethical obligation to figuratively "fall upon our sword" (read: resign from the assignment) if the client is failing to acknowledge, much less, heed our advice? Paradoxically, did the failure to risk "falling upon one's sword" at an opportune time result in either being prematurely removed from the assignment or, worse yet, earn a negative reference?

In the world of both commercial and noncommercial foodservice, I have witnessed way too many situations where the documented problems were just as obvious as the solutions and, yet, no one was willing to confront those in power. Some examples:

Hidden Subsidy Scenario

Retail prices had not been raised in more than five or more years because senior management did not

want to upset the _____ (fill in the blank with the client's employees, students, etc.).
- Why? Until recently, the program was not losing money.
- Why was the program not losing money?
- Because catering prices have been "secretly" subsidizing the overall program for years in order to keep retail prices "affordable."
- What happened? With the recent economic downturn, all catering has been suspended for budgetary constraint reasons until future notice.
- Client's directive: "Do not, under any circumstances, recommend increasing retail prices or reducing service levels."

Now, Mr. or Ms. Consultant, what do you do?

Ostrich Scenario

A large university's residential meal plan program has been financially successful for several years by requiring mandatory 19-meals-a-week or unlimited-dining plans only.

Residential students have been begging for more flexible meal plans that will allow them greater freedom as to when, where and how often they want to eat on campus.

The Student Union, which operates all retail facilities on campus, has petitioned Residential Dining for several years to offer more flexible meal plans that include discretionary dining dollars that can be spent in support of the retail venues.

Residential students have no incentive to support any of the retail facilities on campus. As a result, there is the very real potential that several of the retail venues will have to be closed since they are losing money. Simply stated, they are not financially

sustaining when the peak demand for service is limited to morning coffee/snack and lunch sales. Besides the problems with the retail food facilities, the Student Union becomes a ghost town after 2:00 p.m. each day.

Residential students are leaving for off-campus housing as soon as possible resulting in a growing residence hall vacancy factor.

A new President arrives and openly wonders why the Student Union is so underutilized and the residential living program has significant vacancies and a lousy reputation.

Your client is the residential housing and dining director, now Mr. or Ms. Consultant what are your recommendations?

Great Business Development Ideas?

You are asked to advise a small regional restaurant chain that, like almost every other public restaurant, is feeling the impact of the poor economy. The owner has been contacted by several of the online coupon companies that promote deals to consumers promising major discounts or half-price deals. The owner is convinced that going the social-media and internet connectivity route is the best way to bring customers to his restaurants for the first time and then "they will become regular patrons, without coupons in hand."

Coupon contracts calling for multiple 50% discounts that would return no more than 25% for every real retail dollar at risk are on his desk and the owner has a pen in hand when he asks you, Mr. or Ms. Consultant, what would you recommend and why?

"There are no great people in this world, only great challenges which ordinary people rise to meet."

- William Frederick Halsey, Jr.

The thundering conclusion here is that clients do not retain consultants to do the easy assignments. There are significant financial and/or career implications associated with what you choose to recommend. Unfortunately, there is no easy "one size fits all" solution that can be offered up for any of the above three mini-case studies. The real question here has to do with your willingness to be the messenger regardless of your own interests.

Consultant Success:
Truth or Illusion?

By Karen Malody, FCSI, Culinary Options

Recently, I came across an academic article that dealt with what many of us fear to consider: consulting failure. I had been investigating the notion of what failure actually means. Dictionaries give us Failure: *"the condition or fact of not achieving the desired end or ends; to prove deficient or lacking; to perform ineffectively or inadequately; omission of occurrence or performance."* One of the

tenets of good consulting is *"to articulate deliverables that represent the desired end results/goals of a project and then deliver them."* Failing would then mean we didn't do what we set out to do. But really, is it that simple?

After reading the study, *The Consultant-Client Relationship: A Systems-Theoretical Perspective* (David Seidl and Michael Mohe, Munich School of Management, University of Munich, 2007), I plunged deeper into other literature that speaks to consulting failure. My first discovery: not a lot has

been written on it. Apparently it's difficult for both clients and consultants to get their heads around this one. But why? Are consultants loathe to define a project as a failure because then *they* would be a failure? Are clients unwilling to proclaim that an effort they commanded—and funded—has failed? Or is it something else? Myriad reasons for failure come to mind:

- Outcomes, desirable or not, occurred that had not been part of the original set of deliverables.
- The consultant met all of the deliverables, but they did not generate a feeling of success.
- Unexpected external factors constantly knocked the process off-line.
- Implementation plans did not survive contact with reality.
- Client and consultant views on what constituted a successful outcome did not mesh.

In the Seidl-Mohe study, the authors strongly assert that classic consulting approaches are dead wrong. Seidl and Mohe vehemently maintain that the traditional understanding of the client-consultant relationship is too simple. It does not take fully into consideration the complexities of the client's and the consultant's "systems," which are brought to the relationship. Each client, each consultant, each organization has its own unique and internal way of operating, communicating and processing—its own system.

The authors explain that consultants *cannot* communicate or direct a lasting change in the client system. The client's communication, or language, is unique to the client and *cannot communicate* with the consultant's equally unique communication system, or with any system outside its own. As a result, a consultant cannot *tell* a client what to do because it will not resonate, be heard or be embraced within the client system. What a concept!? And yet, haven't we all understood, at one point or another that others can't tell us what to do, that effective change must come from within?

It is only within a third system that a true success can occur, according to Seidl-Mohe. This third sys-

tem—the "consulting (contact) system"—is created out of the temporary overlap of the client system and the consultant system. And it can succeed, not because of analysis, or expertise, or understanding or communication, but because it stimulates **perturbations** in the client system. These perturbations can take root in the client organization in a native form, and in turn, can lead to real internal changes.

Perturbation. Really? I bristled at the word. In my mind, perturbing someone is negatively associated with needling, even to the point of anger. The authors' view, however, is quite different: yes, it involves a degree of clashing, but rather than creating an upset, the process triggers something that causes what the authors call "noise" in the client system. Noise catches attention and causes reactions—reactions that cannot be predicted or controlled by the consultant and often are unasked for by the client. But such noise—conflict, questioning, irritation—is necessary for true, internal change. Noise generates conflict between what is, and what is beginning to be seen as possible—in other words, solutions—which are the goal of the project.

It's a bit like the formation of a natural pearl: when an irritant, such as a piece of sand, works its way into particular species of mollusks, they secrete a fluid to coat the irritant. Layer upon layer of this coating is deposited on the irritant until it forms a lustrous pearl. Such can be the result of appropriate perturbation: gem-like solutions can occur.

Another way to think of it is inoculation. The consultant may inoculate the client, but it is the client's ability to absorb and use this input according to its own nature, within its own system, that leads to real change and ultimate success. And this process is even more effective with Socratic probing and questioning than with the conventional, didactic instruction that so many of us as consultants think we need to bring to the table. In the end, then, we may be better off embracing fluidity, flexi-

bility and fearlessness of change in our own systems as well. This does not suggest that we abdicate our responsibility, but rather that we not waste time beating ourselves up if we are not thrilled with every result.

In this approach, misunderstandings are not only inevitable, (as we all know), but they are necessary, can be very productive and should not to be avoided as a sign of impending failure! Stop trying

The three systems involved in the consultant intervention.
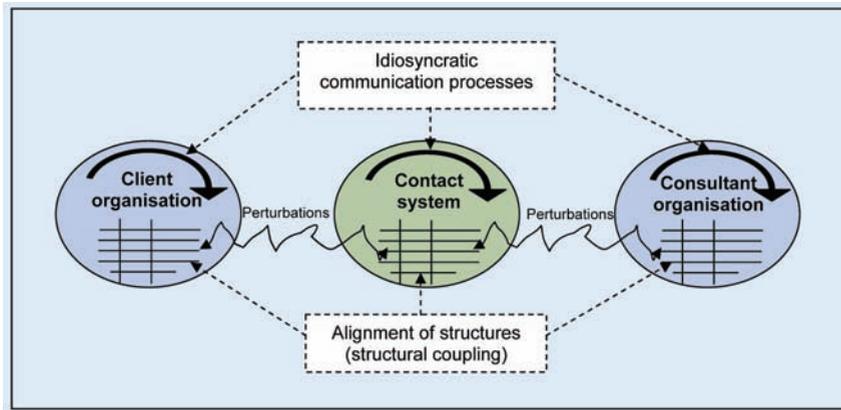
Source: The Consultant-Client Relationship: A Systems-Theoretical Perspective, David Seidl and Michael Mohe, Munich School of Management, University of Munich, 2007, p. 14.

to clear up communication; it can't be done. The client and consultant systems—in being unique—are incompatible. Rather ride along with the process, not with the goal of taming or shaping it, but of enduring it for the allotted time required for some true shift in thinking or action to occur.

In this light, consulting is the process itself, not the outcome. It is a culmination of questions asked, which in turn results in the client initiating and facilitating its own internal discovery process. I must assume nothing—no foreknowledge on the client's part, no perspective, no vocabulary. I must continuously ask questions in such a way as to get from zero to project speed in the shortest time possible and hope the client evolves critical relevancy. What the client retains, *that* is the result of perturbation. It will force the client to figure out how this newly, internally discovered information fits. The client now will ponder, discuss, investigate, try out *within its own systems* this new thing it has discovered in a way unanticipated by the consultant. And quite possibly beyond what the consultant could have impressed on the client had outside impression ever been an option. The change brought about by the exercise may create a success that far exceeds forced change. Is that cool or what?!

I am starting to understand that consulting is not about me being the intrusive expert who has an answer for everything—especially if the client cannot understand what I am saying as a consultant. That's akin to frustrated American travelers talking louder in foreign countries, as if yelling will make their English more clear to those who don't speak it!

Seidl and Mohe assert that most classic academic sources define consultancy failure/success in terms of the client and/or consultant. Most literature on the topic, as they report it, attributes consulting failure to

- Personal characteristics of the consultant and client (e.g. lack of skills).
- Technical shortcomings (e.g. ineffective project management).
- Unstable or bad consultant-client relationship (e.g. lack of communication), and/or
- Socio-political aspects of the client organization (e.g. lack of readiness for/resistance to change).

The assumption, then, from a conventional POV, is that if a consultant attends to all of these issues, it's possible to increase the chance that consulting interventions will be successful. Seidl and Mohe disagree.

In another source, *Conditioned for Accomplish-*

Each client, each consultant, each organization has its own unique and internal way of operating, communicating and processing—its own system.

ments, author C.F. Agbata points out that failure need not be negative and suggests that it can be good for us. So, what if we were to consider this: The act of failing or succeeding is simply a judgment, not an event? It is what we say it is—or isn't. Lou Tice of the Pacific Institute, a corporate attitude adjustment consultancy, says "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, either way you are right." It's a small step to "Whether you think you failed, or think you succeeded, either way you are right." So why not just abandon the terms altogether?

Instead, what if we focus on process to allow outcomes that are organic and that can be surprisingly enlightening? As a kid learning to ride a bike I was constantly advised to avoid the holes in the road. Well, with 'holes' in mind what else could I do but hit them! Once I let go of the concept of

hitting or not hitting the holes, and just concentrated on riding my bike, I no longer hit any holes. In other words, as a consultant, I should be devoting my time to whatever arises—my riding—not whether or not whatever arises is in my plan or could cause my plan to fail—the holes.

Along with riding the process, another change from the norm might be to give less weight to active listening. Instead, by asking questions, we allow the client to self-discover, letting him hear his own thoughts unfold as we as consultants facilitate the process. You only have to be married a short while to realize that listening is not a cure-all. People, groups, companies speak languages, again, that are unique to them. As my husband, an English instructor says "it is not the words we don't know—we realize we don't and look them up—it is the words we think we know [that can be misunderstood]." In other words, good listening is not a safeguard against misunderstanding, because definitions are unique to systems.

This is a lot like Game Theory as explained by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern with *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior.* The authors were hoping to find mathematical answers to economic problems, but they found more. Basically a game is:

- Any scenario in which two players are able to strategically compete against one another, and the strategy chosen by one player will affect the actions of the other player
- Outcomes can be measured by the amount of utility, or value, a player derives from them

In every consulting relationship there are two players (client and consultant) who are strategically maneuvering one against the other, and the strategy chosen by one will affect the actions of the other. And since it is impossible to see the future, we must invest heavily in the present in order to survive shifts in strategy of the other. In these terms, I concluded, *success is accomplished when the client believes that having had the relationship with the consultant has placed them in better stead than before they had it.* This does not necessarily mean the "original objectives/deliverables" were met. This might be what they mean when they say "It is not whether you win or lose but how you play the game." Because if the client does not feel that they have won something, even if all the deliverables are met, then the consultant certainly has failed.

Perturbations can take root in the client organization in a native form, and can lead to real internal changes.

We are not hired to fix the client, though often they come to us and ask exactly that. I believe effective consultants influence clients to re-tool so that they autonomously achieve new breakthroughs, understandings and truths that they own and can use going forward—without us. "We can only learn that which is congruent to our current understanding," said psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, after Jean Piaget. This in turn leads to my husband's ironic observation on his own profession: "We can learn, but we cannot teach." True success in consulting of any kind ends with not just the elimination of the consultant, but elimination of the need for the consultant.

One thing is certain: the multitude of factors involved at any given moment within a client-consultant relationship is complex beyond the wildest imagination. So don't run in fear. Perturbation and productive misunderstanding—bring them on! Within these realms lie opportunities, learning and exhilaration for both the client and the consultant.