

# Consulting - New Language, new Possibilities?

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## 'Super Experts' and Language Philosophy?

Some discourses of organizational consulting assume consultants must have a special type of expertise and must be a highly qualified expert on the organization being counseled. Thanks to his acquired knowledge, he develops skills, and especially his so called meta-perspective gives him a better understanding of the way the organization functions than any other member of the organization.

For this reason, a consultant with the best means of transformation at his disposal can use intervention as a harpoon to solve problems or to create new communication structures.

These interventions are used in carefully measured doses for specific purposes. In this sense, consultants can define themselves as 'super experts'. The following statements will clarify that these forms of self-description are abbreviated and are under the influence of certain «language bewitchments». I am grateful to Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1984) for three important ideas that influence the practice of consulting today. They are:

- language games,
- bewitchment<sup>1</sup> through language and
- philosophizing as therapeutic task

To save both myself and the reader a philosophical excursion, which may bring about more confusion than clarification, I would like to tell a humorous story, which may help to understand Wittgenstein's proposed ideas.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are in the middle of a case, which has forced them to buy a tent and camp out. In the middle of the night Holmes awoke and immediately woke up Watson asking him the question: «Watson, when you look at the sky and the stars, what conclusion do you draw?» After pondering a while, Watson answered: «When I look at the sky and see the bright stars and their relationships, then I draw the conclusion that the stars and their constellations must contain a certain regularity! Which means that there must be at least one other star which supports life». Holmes, in turn, pondered awhile before responding: «That's curious. My conclusion was that someone has stolen our tent»!

One way to understand the story is that Watson and Holmes are involved in the same language game: Holmes makes an observation, shares it with Watson, asks him to draw a conclusion and Watson complies, as so often before etcetera. Watson bewitched his inner dialog (pre-understanding): he assumes that Holmes expects the usual criminological combination of facts and conclusions for solving the case, which means that he doesn't question his own 'reasoning', assuming that the conversation in the context of the established relationship between him and Holmes is in accord with their usual criminological language game. This proves to be a misapprehension, which can be thought of as a 'bewitchment' cast by language that (temporarily) prevents the obvious assumption 'the tent has disappeared and this is why I can see the sky full of

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<sup>1</sup> German: Verhexung

stars'. This is what Wittgenstein sees as the therapeutic task of philosophy, namely the obvious, something directly under the observer's nose, which is not seen, is made obvious.

Wittgenstein says that philosophy should have the effect – metaphorically – of showing the fly the way through the neck of the bottle. In my own words, philosophical conversations should help to dissolve or deconstruct the language games, which make certain connotations incomprehensible by asking specific questions or using metaphors, (see below). I would like to emphasize that the story of Holmes and Watson suggests the following: if you can see the stars, but not the fact that the tent was stolen, it could be assumed that bewitchments are capable of preventing the recognition of «objective reality».

Deconstruction however, which I will propose below, means that several possible descriptions – including those which have not previously been thought of or discussed – can be opened up. The description suggested in the story of Holmes and Watson is only one of many. You could claim that the narrator hasn't told the whole story, giving the story a new twist. For our purposes, the discourse in which you participate essentially determines which consulting opportunities are opened and which remain closed. The following section proposes a language that may open new consulting opportunities.

## New Language, New Possibilities?

Consulting mandates usually require comprehension of the singular circumstances of a special case. But perhaps the above thoughts about language are relevant. I am convinced that at least two conditions should be considered:

1. Consultants should recognize all existing manners of speaking and describing and
2. They should not leave their language sensitivity or critical mind in the cloakroom of the business to be counseled.

In the following section I will attempt to demonstrate that what could be called discourses in the vocabulary of the postmodern can help to open new possibilities for consulting. The central assumption underpinning this thesis is that communication, especially conversing with one and other, constructs social reality.

But first the question: «What does 'postmodern' mean»?

The first time I heard the word 'postmodern' I asked what it was supposed to mean. But I did not receive a satisfactory answer. «It must be something that comes after that, which is modern; but that makes no sense, because modern is always the last state of development. Somehow the concept of postmodern is nonsense».

Being more or less in agreement, I read works of sociology, which transformed the adjective 'postmodern' into a noun – such as 'From the Modern to the Postmodern'.

After which the concept of 'postmodern' was rejected in favor of concepts such as 'The Late Modern', the '2nd Modern' and others.

It wasn't until after I had confronted Lyotard, the French philosopher who created the concept and introduced it to philosophy that it started to dawn on me what it was all about. Again: «What does 'postmodern' mean»? Lyotard says in his book 'Postmodernism for Children' (1987): «A piece of art is only modern if it was postmodern before. In light of this, postmodernism is not the end of modernism, but its birth, its permanent birth». How can this be understood?

1. «Everything that is old must have been young». That would mean that which is postmodern is young and that which is currently modern is older than that which is postmodern?
2. «Those who come after must be younger than their parents». Metaphorically that would mean, 'parents are modern, children are postmodern' But as soon as the children get parents and 'modern', they must have been 'postmodern'.
3. «Those who have 'come after' today, will one day be parents».

For the sake of our discussion we can assume that it doesn't make any sense to talk about the postmodern as a stage in the development of human history. It would be more useful to define postmodern as an adjective or adverb for 'relational processes' – an

epistemological stance so to speak. This understanding – from my point of view – is more consistent with Lyotard's concept, and approaches the idea that postmodern is in a constant state of change – transformational and reflexive.

If these ideas are taken seriously, they can culminate in the statement: to the extent that there are multiple descriptions, which are expressed by multiple voices, these descriptions may also contradict each other. Therefore it is more useful for the processes of social construction to foster the idea that the different opinions supplement each other rather than seeing them as a battle leading to one definitive description united under one fixed truth, or working toward it. In accord with these ideas it is not necessary to unite different voices in one voice to a common (consensual) description or to convert these descriptions into one and ascribe 'the character of truth' to it. Rather, the diversity of descriptions – including the few descriptions, which have been accepted as 'generally valid'- should be coordinated for all the participants in useful ways. This idea of coordination of multiple descriptions will be discussed below and reflected on for practical consulting processes. In conclusion – ideas that are postmodern are characterized by diversity and reflection in transformation.

## Multiple Ethics

One of the more serious arguments against tolerance and encouraging more descriptions is the assumption that this would invite arbitrary descriptions – everyone can construct and change his own description to suit his personal taste, current mood, and whim or desire to please others. Actually, you can ascribe a constructing character to descriptions combining the ideas of 'radical constructivism', 'social constructionism' and 'social poetics', which can be summed up under the category 'postmodern orientation' and criticize them as arbitrary: doing only what pleases, what is popular, what celebrates individual taste and gives in to social hedonism and call it a 'postmodern aesthetic'.

What then should replace the few 'right' and 'objective descriptions', what 'take the place

of a generally accepted truth'? As already explained, a postmodern orientation cannot provide a definitive answer to these or any other questions. The more multiple descriptions exist and are tolerated, the more rules will be needed to deal with their diversity and their coordination i.e., ethical questions will become more important. Listening to the multitude of different descriptions is in itself an expression of ethical behavior, which respects the existence of differing opinions and points of view. On the other hand, that which different groups consider ethical behavior will be especially important. Put briefly, every group, every family, and every business, constructs its own ethics; a butcher does not follow the same ethical attitudes as the surgical ward of a hospital nor does the family of the owner of a real estate office. That which takes the place of so-called objective or true descriptions are socially constructed local ethics, which are more or less in accord with the demands and the way of life of the groups which produce them. These socially constructed ethics determine, for example, what is encouraged and allowed within a group and what is forbidden and what is disapproved of.

## Conjoint Learning

In the current discourses on consulting a more or less unspoken controversy arises concerning the stance of the consultant. Should s/he bring acquired competence and knowledge to the consulting situation or should s/he adopt the stance of not knowing and non-expertise (Anderson, 1999). Without going into the arguments, I would like to ask a few questions, which can help make a point that may be useful for the individual consulting mandates:

1. Who is/what are the mandate(s) for the consulting process and what purpose should this process serve?
2. Which stance can influence the consulting process in a positive manner serving the proposed goals and in collaboration with the mandates?

3. In which form can the consulting process contribute most effectively to the desired results?

As these questions demonstrate, the focus is on the consulting processes – their forms and their contents – as well as the desired goals. The consultant her – or himself – is less the centre point. Rather s/he is assigned the ‘role of a servant’ within the consulting process.

The consultant is more of an expert who serves the process, while the mandate determines the content. This means the client determines which topics should be covered during the consulting. If the CEO of a computer company hires a consultant to help his company with certain conflicts in the area of coordination between his family and his activities in the company, he won’t expect his technical expertise to be questioned by the consultant. On the other hand, he will expect the consultant to make suggestions on the course of the consulting process. Both sides will agree on the form and content of the process and each will contribute to the collaborative process according to their specific expertise. In this way they will attempt to construct a conjoint learning experience, which will help them to reach their goals. If you will, ethics demand that the consultant invite an effective form of collaboration and contribute to the creation of a good (mutual consulting) atmosphere which enables both customer and the consultant to enter a conjoint learning experience in order to serve the achievement of the goals on which they have agreed. An attitude of learning on the part of the consultant will contribute more to this type of process than an attitude of ‘expertise’. In sum, collaborative ethics are what is called for, ethics which promote constructive forms of collaboration and mutual learning rather than expert ethics which provide information on which point of view is closer to the ‘true or better description’.

## Deconstructing

What are the consequences of these considerations when they are applied to the ethics of a consulting team? Put briefly, one could say that multiple descriptions (multivocality) are not only permitted, but also encouraged. Here I make a distinction between deconstructing and analyzing. The deconstruction of socially dominant points of view appears in place of analysis designed to discover 'a specific truth behind the events' or to develop a description of the events in the context of a particular theory. So the process of deconstructing can bring forth a previously unformulated description or the 'not yet said' – as Harlene Anderson might put it. Deconstruction is understood in the sense of supplementing and creating new points of view and meanings, which overcome dominant forms of analysis and attempt to strip down to the 'basic underlying objective facts and truths'. Deconstructing should enable new ways of understanding, which have previously not been expressed and, in turn, open new possibilities for action (see e.g., Boje, 1995). They must develop in the context of relationships, which conform to the relational forms of responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999). This means helpful reflecting processes will be initiated and maintained through relational responsibility or consideration for the consequences on the relationships, brought about by individual or collective action (Derrida, 1985; Roth and Deissler, 2001).

## Discourses

I would like to return to the idea of language games and link this to discussions of 'problem systems', 'linguistic systems' (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988), 'discourses' and 'forms of conversation' (Deissler, 2000). Let us take a closer look at one of Goolishian's famous thesis: «...a problem is a problem as soon as it is called a problem». This says that a 'problem' enters the social arena and becomes socially relevant when it is made the 'topic of conversations'.

This may seem trivial, but it has important practical consequences and if Goolishian's

thesis is reformulated for this discussion, it takes on more meaning:

Problems/solutions are created communicatively; everyone who communicates participates in the process. That means, everyone who talks with each other and/or works on the question posed by a 'problem' and/or a 'solution' belongs to the 'system'. These not more specifically defined systems are in principle the 'linguistic systems' (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988), and which I refer to as discourses or forms of conversation. Discourses or forms of conversation can be understood as forming multiple descriptions which are not 'independent of the observers', but gain their relevance by forming conversations in which the participants are interrelated.

In other words: when creating a system of consulting it makes more sense to construct or understand the current system of communication (discourse, form of conversation) in collaboration with the customers. These discourses may centre on a 'problem' and/or a 'solution', a 'topic of negotiation' at the beginning. In the process of consulting 'problems' etc. may be deconstructed and/or dissolved in communal processes or in mutual 'appreciative inquiries' (Anderson et al, 2001). Because attention is not focused on 'systems independent of the observer' but on problem relevant communication systems, the question arises, how can these relevant systems be described or how can they be constructed.

## Discourses in Dialogue - Coordination of Discourses

In a consulting context there can be no a priori systems waiting to be discovered and objectified by consultants or researchers using special measuring instruments. Relevant systems of communication, discourses or conversational forms arise from the questions asked or the goals set by the customers.

That means, to 'solve' particular problems, certain conversational forms will be coordinated or organized, i.e. the relationships of the conversational forms to each other will be constructed by the people participating in the consulting process.

An example from my consulting practice will clarify how different forms of communication

relate to each other, especially how they can be brought into dialog with each other. The head of a software company and his wife came for a consult. At that time, the subject was the husband's lack of commitment in raising the children, his (excessive) commitment to the company, the couple's sexual relationship, the husband's alcohol consumption, the financial situation of the family, and the company's future perspectives. There were many conversations with the couple supplemented by individual conversations with the wife and with the husband. Approximately every second conversation was conducted with a 'reflecting colleague'.

An individual conversation with the husband resulted in the idea of having a conversation with his wife and two close colleagues in the company and their wives. This came up when the consultant agreed that, to a great extent, the problems were in the area of coordination between company and the different families engaged in the company. The husband agreed with the consultant.

While the idea to change the focus of the consulting came from the consultant, the company boss suggested the participants for the conversation.

The consultant offered to include fellow consultants in the conversation as a reflecting team. The boss' wife, the two colleagues and their wives were all invited and all of them came – except for the wife of one of the colleagues.

The conversation lasted approx. 2.5 hours. It consisted of the following phases:

1. Introductions of the male colleagues and their wives, as well as the introductions of the members of the consulting group.
2. Conversation between the consultant and the company boss about the course of the conversation, which ran according to the consultant's suggestion as follows:
  - a. a. Conversation with the colleagues of the company about their questions.
  - b. Conversation with the wives about their questions.
  - c. Reflection of the consulting team.
  - d. (as b.): Reflection on the ideas of the consulting team.
  - e. (as a.): Reflection on the ideas of the consulting team.

3. The question of the wives' and the colleagues' consent.
4. Carrying out the agreed plan (steps a. through e.).
5. Open exchange by all the participants.
6. Goodbyes.

For those who are not familiar with the 'reflecting team' (Andersen, 1990), the adaptation of different consulting contexts (Deissler, 1998 also Deissler and Schug, 2000), and postmodern procedures (Anderson, 1999; Deissler, 2000), should note that each consulting conversation takes place in the presence of the other participants. This form of consulting makes it possible for the various conversations to converse with each other.

All of the participants found the entire process extremely interesting, helpful and constructive. Subsequently, all three conversation groups – the boss' partnership, the computer company, the consulting team – made significant transformations.

## Conclusion

A certain vocabulary and manner of speaking may dominate an organization as well as the conversations of consultants and researchers describing them. This chapter attempted to open up new ways of describing and understanding by centering the assumption that the form and content of descriptions in systems of communication develop, become established, and may be transformed.

Through the reference to ethics, conjoint learning, deconstruction and the use of concepts such as 'problem systems', 'linguistic systems' and conversations in dialog, consulting forms with different focal points are made possible, as are other processes and outcomes.

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