

Lyon Mersen Consulting – After Session Reflections

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In Lyon I consulted with Mersen on the question of how they can best train their 1000 managers. In this effort I was joined by Hannah Jones, Sammi Philips, Grace Amos, Grace Chen, and Danny Howell. I am quite satisfied with the resulting recommendations we gave to the client, even more pleased with the process we engaged in to generate that recommendation, and thrilled with what I am taking away after debriefing and reflecting on the experience.

My first impressions formed by our initial briefing with Mersen in an office at one of their manufacturing compounds was that they were a manufacturer with a highly competent but under-appreciated HR department. Artifacts of this manufacturing-first culture were prevalent everywhere: a sign with X days without an accident at the entrance, a drab waiting room that wouldn't have felt out of place in Flint Michigan in the 1980s replete with samples of their industrial fuses in modest display cases, signs at every turn on the (nicer and more modern) office building's staircase imploring that using the hand-rail was mandatory. The theme carried through into some of their process they so generously shared with us; the employee performance review was a sufficiently detailed plan that could as reliably manufacture an employee's yearly rating as build a widget on an assembly line. I was more impressed by the amount of work they shared with us that they had done around company mission, values, and coordinated development priorities for the HR department. Despite the extensive information they shared with us, the key take-away from me from our initial client meeting was the non-verbal reaction when I asked how supported training was by other parts of the organization. A big sigh.

Our eventual recommendation to Mersen supported this initial hunch that HR would need to bolster support throughout their organization for Manager training and development. I'm proud of the presentation and companion document we gave back to Mersen, although there are

some areas we might have clarified our recommendation. Firstly, I think we could have been stronger in delivering our recommendation that Mersen was not yet ready for a Corporate University. The message was there, but we lost some of the impact from our rehearsed plan when we delivered it and the client would have benefited from a stronger and clearer answer. Secondly, I feel that to reach our conclusion and make sense of the information we had we used a relatively complex model that might have been simplified further in delivery. This type of finesse takes time of course, and the client gave clear indication that they followed our structure by identifying it as a maturity model, but nonetheless if I could keep working on it I would have made the stages and associated action recommendations from each stage clearer.

Now to the process, which was stimulating, challenging, and ultimately very rewarding for me on a few levels. First to the challenge, where my long-present insecurity was triggered when a few of my colleagues appeared to have a superior grasp and professional experience with relevant areas of the client's needs. This mirrored some self-doubt I had been experiencing earlier in the week but much to my pleasure I found at this juncture I was able to stay present in the team process, leave space for the great ideas of my colleagues, and find ways to connect my own insights, needs, and ideas to the larger work. Well that was just super for me to be able to withstand the heat long enough to observe myself contributing value to a team. I feel that I could show-up differently than in my last consulting group where I struggled with either taking control through dominance or withdrawing from guiding the ship. I learned that I am compelled to understand as much as I can about the circumstances within which I operate—in this case the client systems—and that from that interest I was able to offer useful guidance to help the rest of my team connect their valuable inputs and make them more relevant. Useful perspective change.

The other area of the team dynamics that I found utterly fascinating in this assignment revolves around in and out-group variables, with some enhancement from power and privilege issues. I consider myself lucky to have been at the core of the team for this project, alongside three intelligent and dynamic women. I credit myself partly for staying present as I mentioned, and I deeply enjoyed the exchange of ideas and the interactions with these three team members throughout the process. Much to my interest, I would later hear these interactions I found enjoyable described by team members who felt excluded as being competitive, impolite, and hurtful. This to me presented an opportunity for a dialog around different perspectives, some of which we had as a group but much of which appeared to be inaccessible for a team member during the debrief phase due to fears of hurting feelings or—I suspect—being too revealed.

When it comes to power and privilege, I recognize that as I heterosexual white male I represent and have some access to a categorical advantage in our broader society. Accepting this and using it as a lens is something I find very informative and it was a factor I believe in some of the group dynamics at play. I welcome the chance to learn issues of unequal power and privilege and take it as my responsibility to educate those less interested and dismantle when possible these imbalances. This I know is not something that everyone is ready to engage in. I had several opportunities to attempt to share my view of team dynamics with team-members who had different views and this practice was very important for my growth as an OD practitioner and something I will be actively looking for more chances to test. As much as I found it thrilling to engage with willing and exciting partners in creating a deliverable for a client, I think it is much more significant to attempt to show someone something that they are actively resistant to seeing, especially when it is relevant to the problem at hand. Luckily I think I have hit upon an area with infinite opportunity for practice.