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For our consulting assignment, our learning group (The Actioneers) was assigned to a client group at the World Bank. We were sponsored and hosted there by Adrian Poffley who was a gracious and informative host. His assistant Aijaz Ahmad provided tireless service in scheduling and coordinating our access to the greater teams Adrian and his colleagues head up. With Aijaz's assistance and Adrian's blessing we were able to interview 20 employees in our quest to find ways to boost productivity for a group that could not increase in headcount despite growth amongst their clients.

I found the entire experience to be exhilarating and packed full of learning opportunities. The chance to work with a global institution engaged in solving massive challenges was inspiring. Being invited to understand and experience the internal organization and employee experience was a generous privilege. Practicing working together with my teammates was continually challenging. Plus, I enjoyed the excuse to put on a suit and be a businessman for a while.

Our team—and of course myself—had a chance to demonstrate a host of skills, attitudes, and behaviors, and I had a great deal of learning from watching our successes and failures. We started our client work by delivering a first impression of professionalism. I felt this in myself and from my team and it was confirmed later by our client in our debrief. It's a small detail but I think it matters and it's not just looking sharp in suits; we were early and respectful towards one another and the client. It felt good and serious. I think our collective attitude entering into this engagement was one of confidence in one another despite complete uncertainty of what we

would face. I can imagine the confidence that is possible when a group has worked together a lot. That would be exciting to experience in consulting. The trust was palpable between us at many times—and made explicit as well—and I also witnessed us frequently asking after our needs, which I think was quite wise. In communication with the team, I also personally engaged in some re-contracting with our client. I had a meeting late on day two with Adrian and pushed back a bit on his request for suggestions from us to solve the problem he presented. To be better in accordance with the recommendations of our consulting method we needed to avoid taking on the expert role and I believe I renegotiated expectations around that to some degree. We also got the chance to demonstrate presentation skills and dialog facilitation in our final client meeting. We attempted but failed at a couple of opportunities to redirect questions back to the group in this same meeting. In our interviews, I used validation and empathy and showed gratitude with those who shared so much with me. The behavior we collectively practiced that made me most proud was caring confrontation during our client debrief. It was connected to a theory we carried with us which I'll touch on again in the next section, but in practice 3 or 4 of us at different times took unique approaches to delivering a specific message about the client's contribution to the problem where each successive attempt was a different effort to put the information in a way that the client could hear and accept it. I think we got pretty close after the third or fourth run at it.

There were three theoretical concepts that I held in mind throughout this client work. The first was the guidance from Peter Block (2011) to presume that the client is contributing to the stated problem they present to you. I extended this presumption to the entire team and found it to be a boundless source of insight. For example, many of the interviewees I spoke with would have an idea for how things could be improved but in the same breath note that management would

have to make any changes. This reliance on authority to solve problems itself prevented problems from being solved even when possible solutions were known.

The second theoretical perspective I used as a lens is again a lesson from Block (2011); presume that the client treats you similar to how he manages his team. In this regard, I found our client to be absolutely wonderful towards us as a consulting team; very caring, polite, engaging, and generous with his time. I also observed some moments when he didn't get what he wanted from us but remained very cordial and considerate of our feelings. I suspect a similar relationship takes place with his team: he takes care of them and treats them well but doesn't push very hard at all and therefore doesn't get some of the results he might and that he wants.

The third area of theoretical reference I found helpful was more conceptually broad: the general concept of organizational culture combined with the viewpoint that everything is data (Schein, 1998). I considered these ideas along the lines of the first theory I carried with me: they are a contributor to the way things are. As Gary Mangiofico shared in a quote from Tom Northup: "Organizations are perfectly designed to produce the results they get." *Everything is data* came home to me when I realized that I was learning more from the presentation of findings meeting and the debrief afterwards than I did from interviewing several people and reading the results of other interviews. In other words, I gathered more data outside of the data gathering phase than during the data gathering phase! The way the team participated in the meeting was massively useful data. The way the team leadership participated in the debrief was data that informed my view of the organization, its culture, and the relationship between this culture and the problems they are trying to solve. This perspective provided the opportunity for the lion's share of the learning I took away from this experience.

After having now in some way assessed an organization, I would like to be more familiar with more models and assessments and some of the many ways they take shape amongst the wide world of internal and external culture. Our team came up with essentially our own approach to assessing, only loosely informed from some readings we've had but mostly defined by the time scope of the client engagement. I think the idea of assessment is critical to doing significant work with an organization, I just find myself ignorant of the vast possibilities I'm certain exist for assessment. For a consultant to dispense with assessment would be to limit herself to the expert or pair-of-hands roles that Schein and Block describe as quite small and ultimately ineffective (Block 2011; Schein 1998). This is an area where more formal study could fill in many pragmatic details for me.

In a continuing trend that is upending my habitual behaviors and beliefs, I found nearly all my learning and development in this course to take place in relationship to others, particularly my learning group members. My experience in this group absolutely defined what I could learn—which was a lot—from this class and client engagement. I will focus on my client engagement and the learning group that I interacted with extensively in working for that client, but I extend these initial thoughts to the cohort at large and some of the smaller groups I worked with over our time in D.C. including my culture research group that interviewed the crowd at the Climate Change protest march. With my learning group, I was thrilled to be able to participate in a way that did not match my more common binary with groups of either mentally checking out or attempting to take over. While I'm sure I engaged in both of those behaviors at times, I found that I was instead invited to contribute at times when I might have otherwise fought to take over. Similarly, I found myself willing to let others handle components of our work while I worked on something else rather than losing interest when not completely in control. The need for our group

to trust one another was a key factor in our ability to work on our client projects and I'm thankful to Lindsey for bringing up this notion early in our work together and for revisiting the theme throughout the days of client work. I recall her asking questions like "does anyone think they can't do this part of the assignment" as a way for us to realize that we could be both strategic and cooperative in dividing work.

At times, I also witnessed us giving too much work to one person when we took this divide and conquer approach, but I also saw in that both a group tendency to take on and not complain as well as to check with one another to offer help as needed. When I think back, watching someone else willingly take on a part of the work that I think I might have been better suited for but was afraid of getting overwhelmed by became a point of discovery of how my emotions come into group work. Again, later during our presentation I learned from watching others struggle what they might need to hear from a trusted colleague in order to grow and I was able to share that directly and effectively due to established relationship strength. Even after our session had closed a team-member asked for a final walk and talk to process some of our interactions and in that one-on-one time I again came to learn more about what information others are operating with and how I am influencing those I work with. It seems I should have to make a serious amendment to my practice of attempting to process information on my own in reflection—after this reflection paper of course—and invite the company and perspective of others into both my work and my processing of that work to really gain from it. At the close of this client work I was staggered by the possibility of what quality work and impact I might be able to have with a close-knit team of colleagues who had worked together and who had some shared experience to draw from. Starting with only trust and little notion of what we might face I know I was able to learn gobs about consulting work. I don't think I'm particularly satisfied with the deliverable we

gave the client, but I am immensely impressed with the amount I was able to learn in just a blink of an eye and take that enthusiasm forward to future work both in and outside this program.

References

Block, P. (2011). *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* (Third ed.). San Francisco, CA, USA: Jossey-Bass.

Schein, E. H. (1998). *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*. Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley.