HELPING GROUPS TO FUNCTION ON THEIR OWN: A NEW FORM OF CONSULTING

BY MARY ANN ALLISON

Everyone knows that we are going through a time of significant social change affecting all areas of our lives. The workplace is no exception. In the face of this trend, the methods we use to help teams and organizations perform effectively must change in concert with new organizational needs. All of us in the fields of systems thinking and organizational learning, whatever our roles, can contribute to designing new ways to support groups.

Traditional Forms of Consulting

Over time, a number of different kinds of consulting assistance have developed, including expert advise on specific topics or methodologies, research (both internal and external), training, and coaching and facilitation. In most cases, these methods have a specific content and outcome as their objective, for example, a strategic or sales plan, identification of a target market, rating of customer or employee satisfaction, or a set of new skills to meet market demands. In these instances, the client assumes that the consultant has a *better* or *correct answer,* and the value of the engagement depends on the consultant's successful delivery of this solution to the client.

In contrast, facilitation—and, in some cases, coaching—is quite different. A superb facilitator doesn't lead a group to the decision he or she recommends; instead he or she helps a group function better together. The value of this kind of work comes from the facilitator's ability to help generate effective group processes—not in his or her content expertise. In fact, the facilitator's effectiveness diminishes dramatically if he or she tries to lead the group to a specific answer.

But this kind of facilitation usually doesn't affect groups outside the one that is involved in the intervention. And in rapidly shifting situations, the processes that both the expert and the facilitator bring—while completely appropriate in specific instances where they are used knowledgeably—may actually *undermine* the group's productivity by creating dependency on a

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third party. Thus, in addition to the traditional consulting activities described above, we are now seeing the need for services that provide *enabling infrastructures*—infrastructures that enable groups with *changing members* to meet *changing goals* in the context of *changing environments.*

Enabling Infrastructures

What are enabling infrastructures? They are the support mechanisms that make it possible for—or *enable*— a group to be highly effective, even if the members of the group change. Enabling infrastructures are a combination of processes and tools organized in specific ways so that they support people individually and collectively in sustaining superior performance. Just as hollow bones, wings, and receptors that can sense updrafts (among other characteristics) enable a

bird to fly, a combination of invisible processes, visible tools, and intentional organization enable a group to function at consistently high levels.

For example, within a company, enabling infrastructures might include mechanisms for mentoring, coaching, and peer support; a corporate culture that sustains transparency, open communication, and development of interpersonal skills; disciplined gathering, sharing, and responding to feedback from throughout the organization; and attention not only to financial health but also to emotional energy.

These processes, tools, and organizational types sustain groups as they gather information, remember, focus, create sense and meaning, project into the future, take action, get feedback, and learn—all functions that enable people to choose goals effectively and sustain high levels of performance in pursuit of their goals, both as individuals and in collaboration. Most organizations already have support for some or all of these activities, but take them for granted. Building enabling infrastructures requires conscious intent; active integration of processes and tools; careful organizational design; and a set of criteria against which to evaluate success and make changes where necessary.

In addition to the specific processes and practices that support the change process, ongoing coaching and support are vital parts of an enabling infrastructure. But most organizations don't have the resources to provide rich support services to every person. This is a problem of *scale.* A longstanding human response to problems of scale is to build *automated tools.* In many organizations, an intranet connects everyone and provides a begin-

ning platform for services that might support every person. A growing number of developers are creating social software—programs to facilitate interaction and collaboration.

Technology, with its ability to offer time- and effort-saving support to many people, can be a powerful part of an enabling infrastructure, but it isn't enough; more than 50 percent of all installed software languishes from lack of use. Thus, the enhanced communication and information capabilities offered by social software must be complemented—and often, in fact, *preceded*—by other forms of training, coaching, and facilitation.

Some Examples in Practice

For instance, an R&D group in a global technology company faced frequent changes in the team's membership, management structure, competitive landscape, and nature of the products they were developing. To create an infrastructure that would enable high levels of performance despite constant shifts, this group added to their staff meetings the disciplined process of reviewing summaries of feedback gathered from each person through the company's intranet concerning a wide-ranging and constantly changing set of balanced scorecard areas—supported by ongoing coaching and facilitation. While in the beginning, both meeting facilitation and individual coaching was provided by an outside facilitator, the long-term goal was for other staff members to develop expertise in this arena. As carefully selected new members arrived, the group paid close attention to getting to know them and

helping them understand "how we do things around here"—going slow by investing time and energy to insure that, when needed to, they could go fast.

The TEC organization is a pioneering example of the power of an enabling infrastructure to connect individuals and groups beyond traditional organizational boundaries. TEC (www.techonline.com) is an organization that brings together small groups (usually around 15 people) of entrepreneurs once a month to give each participant the benefit of advice from peers using a carefully designed facilitated process. Monthly meetings are supplemented with coaching for each group member and a host of online services.

In their meetings, TEC members are not focused on a single opportunity or problem but on the changing opportunities and problems that arise over time in each participant's business. Group facilitators are carefully selected, receive ongoing training, and get feedback on their effectiveness. Participants are screened for quality and group fit.

Although enabling infrastructures often differ from organization to organization in the ways in which they are implemented, they share many goals and characteristics. For example, they are designed to facilitate group processes rather than support teams in reaching a specific goal. And they include careful selection of participants as well as an emphasis on the interaction among people and their tools. A successful enabling infrastructure builds in processes (prototyping, training, coaching, buddy-systems, feedback

mechanisms, etc.) to support participant needs and sustain high levels of collaboration. Further, as processes tend to degrade over time, continuous feedback specifically on the quality of the group's interactions helps to maintain quality and secure resources when required.

A New Focus

As shown above, when thinking about enabling infrastructures, we must include a combination of disciplined processes, individual coaching and training, and automated support with an intentional organizational design and focus. In the design process, I believe it will be helpful to use a series of criteria against which to judge our efforts; that is, the initiative must be continuous (not event-based), be based on multiple processes (not "just" learning or feedback), support every person (not only leaders or poor performers), and generate autonomy (not dependency on consultants).

In writing this article, I want to draw attention to enabling infrastructures as a new area in which consultants can have an impact by describing how it is different from traditional consulting services. By creating this distinction and point of focus, I invite systems thinkers to contribute to creating the systems, practices, experience, and body of literature that will help support the development of these needed services in a rich and humane way. ◘

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