

The Impact of
Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach. Edwin C. Nevis

Marion Gillie

I first read Edwin's book in 1994, seven years after it was first published. As is so often the case, the timing of my reading was perfect and its impact on my thinking was profound. To understand the significance of this book for me, it is necessary to understand the context of my work at that time. I was ten years into a career in the UK as an organizational development (OD) consultant and had worked in Central Government, one of the big Management Consultancies and at the time of reading Edwin's book I was a partner in a niche OD consultancy. I had been pretty much steeped in the prevailing organizational philosophies of the time, which had evolved out of the scientific management principles of the early industrial era. This traditional paradigm, founded on the Newtonian notion that things can be predicted, planned and controlled, meant that I was a consultant in a world in which (ideally) business leaders sit down together and somehow develop the strategy of their organisation for the next one, five or more years, targets are set, business objectives and plans are drawn up, and performance is monitored and measured against the agreed targets. When targets are not being met, adjustments are made to 'correct' the shortfall. Even at the time I was acutely aware that the consulting practice as described in the texts did not match my experience of reality. Experience showed me that those strategies were hardly ever achieved according to plan and I witnessed huge effort going into adjusting figures, predictions and targets along the way to 'make it look' as though things were on track. I facilitated team meetings where agreements were reached that were rarely acted on and I coached leaders and managers who clearly were not in control of a lot of what was happening around them. Resistance to naming and exploring this was so high that it seemed to be like a dirty little secret that no one wanted to talk about (at a personal level because of fear of failure and at a business level, business analysts and share prices are intolerant of Executive Boards who are overly open about uncertainty).

Much of my work at that time was with leadership teams in organizations that were going through significant change, often as the result of a restructuring following a merger or acquisition, or the arrival of a new CEO who wanted to ring the changes. I spent my time facilitating off-site meetings in which they might be clarifying their organizational vision, making tough decisions or working to become more effective in their own functioning as a team. Thinking back, I can see how my very role as 'consultant' was shaped by the 'predict, plan, monitor, correct' paradigm of the times. As a consultant, I knew what I was expected to deliver. My 'task' was to do things like 'keep the team on track' towards an outcome (usually pre-specified to me by the team leader), to stimulate change, to get them focused, to keep their energy up, to

‘get them to commit to action’, to help them ‘see’ how they become ineffective and rectify their interpersonal shortfalls. Even as I write this now I feel the weight of (inappropriate) responsibility on my shoulders and can see how much my approach has changed. Edwin’s writing was one of two significant (and linked) influences on me that were highly catalytic in helping me to reshape how I defined my role, how I actually intervened as a consultant and how I contracted for working in this way.

The first catalyst occurred in the early 1990’s when I had the privilege of working with Ralph Stacey, who at that time, was in the early stages of writing about his life’s passion, the complexity and unpredictability of life in general and organizational life in particular (see for example his earliest and most recent publications, Stacey, 1991 and Stacey, 2009). Stacey introduced my colleagues and I to a radically new way (in those days) of thinking about and understanding the dynamics of organizational life, based on theories of chaos and self-organization developed by mathematicians, physicists, chemists and biologists. He showed us how systems driven by certain types of perfectly orderly laws are capable of behaving in a manner which is random and therefore inherently unpredictable, and that creativity, innovation and significant change are all critically dependent upon conditions of disorder, ambiguity, chance and difference. My work with him and my subsequent exploration of other writers who were challenging the orthodoxy of the time (e.g. Weick, 1995, and more recently, Shaw, 2002) reinforced my own observations and confirmed the reality of organizational life, that an ‘organization’ is multiple and complex sets of relational processes that are in a state of constant flux (or more simply, human beings engaged in numerous local conversations, interactions and power struggles which shape how the future unfolds) most of which are impossible to either predict or control.

So, in a nutshell, I had reached a point where I was challenging a paradigm that assumed that if I did X then Y, Z would occur, yet not having any coherent alternative model of consulting to support me. Which brings me to *Organizational Consulting, a Gestalt Approach*. This book was the catalyst that changed the way I see my role, how I contract my role and how I work with the system, and in the rest of this article I will set out the key principles from the book that enabled me to embark on such a significant shift.

After reading Nevis, the first challenge to my thinking came from an exploration of what the consultant conceptualises as ‘data’ and how that data is gathered. Until then, as a good ‘process consultant’ (see e.g. Schein, 1988) I started every organizational development assignment by gathering ‘data’. I would meet with key stakeholders and with every team member and seek their views on a whole range of things to do with the effectiveness of the team and how it delivered its remit. Sometimes I would collect psychometric data on preferences and team dynamics which I would feedback individually and to the team. The intent behind this was to be

able to offer back to the team a sound diagnosis of their strengths and development needs so that together we would have a common understanding of the issues that needed to be addressed. All very logical and well intended of course, but so often one step removed from reality. I recall one extremely challenging meeting where I presented back to a team the key themes arising from the data, only to have them reject the very data they had given me to begin with. I learnt from Edwin that in Gestalt “awareness is the starting point from which all the work proceeds” (p. 42) and thought that was exactly what I was doing, helping to raise awareness of the team’s collective views. I was, wasn’t I? The answer to this, I soon began to realise, is both yes and no. It was certainly my intention, but the methodology missed a few critical points. First, despite strong protestation to the contrary from fellow consultants, the process consulting approach to organisation development is a highly consultant-led process with overtones of the medical model, i.e. run a diagnosis, seek the pathology and find the right cure. I have just returned to one of my ‘bibles’ of the day (Burke, 1982) and see that there are two chapters that cover different models against which to diagnose, and different processes that can be applied. Says Edwin (p. 111) “any system or model that is based on predetermined areas for organizational study implies that one has hypotheses about what is important to study before even beginning the study”. My intent here is not to be critical of this approach, it is very effective, and it too has developed a great deal since the early 1980s. It is simply different to the approach that Edwin’s book was provoking me to consider. Back in 1994 when I first read *Organizational Consulting, A Gestalt Approach*, the Cycle of Experience was new to me and the notion of the Interactive Cycle was a revelation. It suddenly became obvious that when working with teams “What each will be able to attend to will vary, and what each will allow to come into awareness will be different” (p. 30). Furthermore, the Interactive Cycle treats everyone’s felt experience as equally weighted and difference is to be expected. So when a consultant talks to individuals separately, then merges the data, key themes tend to become those things mentioned by everyone, which may not be the most important, the most ‘figural’ thing, for any of them! In addition, what jumps out of the data and becomes figural for the consultant may not be what is most figural for the team, especially if the consultant has been diagnosing the team against the consultant’s favourite model of team effectiveness or psychological health. This considerable insight has had a big impact on my work. I do still meet with individual team members but my focus is on starting to establish a connection with them and to give them the opportunity to talk about their reactions to the work that they are engaging in with me. I no longer seek information about the team’s effectiveness in order to feed it back to them. Instead I wait until I am in a room with them, where they are having conversations about something they have declared an interest in, and I use the Interactive Cycle of Experience as my ‘compass’ to help me track different energy levels. I now see difference as ‘normal’, the result of the sheer complexities of human interaction. Furthermore, Edwin’s book and my subsequent participation in the Cape Cod Training Programme has shifted my way of

attending to the system. Edwin writes (pp. 108–110) about the Sherlock Holmes Model, i.e. the ability to take limited data, add analytical reasoning and quickly form a workable hypothesis, which he contrasts with the Columbo method (faltering and stumbling through, soaking up information like a sponge until the pieces form a pattern in his mind). This is metaphor perfectly describes my shift in focus. I would once have ‘worked hard’ watching and listening to a team at work, actively seeking a hypothesis about their functioning. Theories and hypotheses would pop into my thoughts and I would look to see if their data fitted. I now (most of the time, who’s perfect?) scan the system at work with what Edwin calls ‘undirected awareness’ and what Sonia Nevis calls ‘soft eyes’, i.e. rather than actively searching for the figure, I now wait and trust that the figure will emerge and become clear to me. This shift in focus helped me realise why my more traditional process consulting approach (based as it was on an implicit model of healthy functioning that I, as consultant was trying to move the team towards) was often less impactful and effective than I’d hoped. I now knew that the ‘real’ work in highly complex systems, where little is predictable, and where things get done not through the formal system but through the informal system (i.e. human beings engaged in numerous local conversations, interactions and power struggles) required something different, and the Gestalt approach offered me a way of looking for and respecting *what is*, how the system already functions (what is well-developed) then looking for what’s missing (what’s under developed or is in the process of developing).

I have been talking about finding new ways of gathering and using data. However, the challenge to my consulting practice was more profound still, a challenge that gave me a whole new dimension to work with in terms of ‘data’. Edwin writes “the Gestalt model is a broader concept than are usual definitions of data or information. The latter connote logical, hard facts, events that are relatively easy to summarize or quantify, and imply linear thinking or an ‘objective reality’” (p. 43). My early training in what was then one of the ‘big six’ management consultancies had taught me exactly that: to work with the rational, the tangible, the ‘discussable’. Indeed, I had learned to *not* show my own reactions and feelings, and had introjected the belief that it was unprofessional to show emotions, that one should be rational and ‘adult’ in working with senior professional clients. Of course this can be a useful and necessary way of working, but Edwin’s writing offered additional options by proposing that ‘data’ can be much more than collective views from team members or observing patterns of behaviour, that one’s own phenomenological data, subjective and irrational as it is, is relevant. This was a steep learning curve for me and I had almost rejected the notion until one day I was facilitating a team who seemed to be going round and round in circles, and when someone said “let’s go over that one more time”, I blurted out totally spontaneously “Oh please don’t, I don’t think I could bear it”, only to find several of the team joined me in my uninhibited display of emotion. First I had to learn to tune into myself and experience my ‘data’, then I had to find my own way of making

sense of the sensations, and that was before I had to learn to have the courage to disclose this to teams of professional business people! This of course is an example of a core aspect of the Gestalt notion of Presence, which I think had been lacking in the more traditional process consulting model. Edwin holds that presence is critical in getting organizational movement (p. 54), he says “In the Gestalt approach, the fullest use of presence is critical. The consultant is not only to stand for and express certain values, attitudes and skills, but to use these in a way to stimulate, and perhaps *evoke* from the client, action necessary for movement on its problems”. Edwin’s assertion really made me think about my role, what I was there to do. I was working with the complexities of human dynamics, in unpredictable systems, and working with people who were also trying to bring some logic, order, control and predictability to their working lives. I wasn’t the only one who was holding back important data (feelings, aspirations, images, desires) in the ‘service of getting the task done’. If I couldn’t model good, robust, authentic contact, how did I expect them to do so when invited to do so by me? Little by little I learnt to use my presence, to authentically say what is going on with me, and seeing what this then evokes in them, with an intent to move towards increased awareness and/or effective mobilisation. This pays dividends. I am currently working with a team of young, enthusiastic executives. In the most recent team meeting to which I was invited as facilitator, the predominant theme was powerlessness, they couldn’t act, it was someone else’s fault, they were demotivated and so on. I had tried all kinds of things to get movement and was starting to notice my own sense of powerlessness and fatigue. I became aware that I’d fallen back into the traditional model of the consultant who sees their role as trying to stimulate change, and reminded myself that a Gestalt approach holds respect for resistance and that my job with this system was to “heighten its awareness of the acting forces for and against its moving to a new place on a problem or an issue” (p. 60). So I said to them, “I don’t know about you, but I notice that all this powerlessness is starting to exhaust me”. I saw a few nods, so working with the Gestalt notion of supporting and respecting the system’s way of being and not trying to change it, I invited them to stay with the powerlessness, to really exaggerate it, and whilst we didn’t have time to go much further, at least the meeting closed with a lot of laughter. I spoke to the team leader a week later who told me that the team had somehow shifted out of the rut they’d been in, and were actively engaged in conversations with some of the people who they’d been blaming.

So as I share this example and bring this article to a close, I am aware of how my practice as a consultant has changed in the 16 years since I first read *Organizational Consulting, A Gestalt Approach*. In addition, in revisiting it for this piece of writing, I notice how well it has stood the test of time, because if the behaviour of organizational systems was inherently unpredictable in 1994, it most certainly still is in 2010 and requires a consulting approach that works with *what is* and with authentic engagement without the need or desire to control, shape or change.

References

- Burke, W. W. (1982). *Organization Development: Principles and Practices*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Nevis, E. C. (1987). *Organizational Consulting, A Gestalt Approach*. Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press.
- Shaw, P. (2002). *Changing Conversations in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change*. London, Routledge.
- Schein, E. H. (1988). *Process Consultation, Volume 1: Its Role in Organization Development*. (Second Edition). Financial Times/ Prentice Hall.
- Stacey, R. D. (1991). *Chaos Frontier, The Creative Strategic Control for Businesses*. Butterworth–Heinemann.
- Stacey, R. D. (2009). *Complexity and Organizational Reality*. (Second Edition). London: Routledge.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage.

Marion Gillie works internationally as a coach and organisational consultant. Based in the UK, she is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Gestalt Psychotherapist, with Masters degrees in Organisational Psychology and Gestalt Psychotherapy. She is Programme Director of the Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Executive Coaching and the Master Practitioner Programme at the Academy of Executive Coaching in the UK, and she is a coach supervisor for programmes at Oxford Brookes University Business School. Marion is also a 'Next Generation' Faculty member of the Gestalt International Study Centre in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She is an Accredited coach and supervisor with the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision.

www.TheGilliePartnership.co.uk