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## Organizational Development Consulting: A Study of Expert Consultants' Key Strategies

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Organizational development consulting: A study of expert consultants' key strategies

by

Mona Vosoughi

A dissertation submitted to the College of Education and Human Services in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

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## **DEDICATION**

I proudly dedicate my dissertation to my mother, Mitra Vosoughi, my Father, Ardeshir Vosoughi, and my sister, Ayda Vosoughi. All of this was possible because of your never-ending love and belief in me. Because of the values you instilled in me, you pushed me towards a forever journey of curiosity and desire for continuous learning and self development. With your generosity and unceasing loyalty, you have enriched my life and opened my eyes to endless possibilities and opportunities. For that, I love and thank you. Hope I made you proud.

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## Abstract

The present study was conducted to capture the collective voice of expert organizational development consultants. Until now, very few studies have been conducted that take into account the collective voices of organizational development consultants. More specifically, the purpose of the present study is to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the approaches expert organizational development consultants use throughout their engagement with their clients in an attempt to add value to and enhance organizational capacity. To understand the process used by this distinct group of leaders, phenomenological qualitative inquiry was the methodology used to conduct this study. Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with seven practicing expert consultants in the Jacksonville, Florida area. Seven themes emerged through careful analysis of the data, supported with relevant concepts from the professional literature. The study has meaningful implications for the study of organization development consulting. It concludes with recommendations for consultants and researchers in the field of organizational development and change.

## **CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM**

### **Introduction**

The organizational world is undergoing drastic changes that call for a shift in leadership strategies needed for organizational development (OD) during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Theoretical concepts from earlier decades evolving from the industrial era's thinking on OD no longer suffice in today's complex, global-digital era. Now, more than ever, there is a need to adopt a new paradigm of OD consulting that meets the growing demands of today's business environment. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that successful organization development consultants, use with their clients to add value to the organization while enhancing its capacity for growth.

Organizational Development has been an evolving practice emerging from human resource development, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, economics, management, and industrial engineering (Burke, 1982; Ruona & Gibson, 2004). Beginning from an earlier focus on psychological dynamics within individuals and groups, OD as a concept was first introduced by Kurt Lewin in the 1950's. There was a transition in the field from product-centered management to management of people and production (Burke, 1994; Schein, 2006). Technological advances in the industrial era resulted in a shift in attention and focus toward the needs of people, their skills, knowledge, and motivation. The focus evolved to thinking about environments that foster creativity and innovation among employees (Burke, 1994). Today, this emphasis and focus on technology has evolved into the digitized, information age where over-access to information further complicates the governance and leadership within organizations (Crane et al., 2012).

The theoretical concepts underpinning leadership and management of organizations from earlier decades are no longer relevant for providing insight and guidance to today's organizational leaders. Unlike the past where organizational leaders could rely on historical events to predict and resolve problems, the complex interdependencies in today's global, digital era make it very difficult for organizational leaders to lead effectively within this unique context of change and ambiguity. Organizations wrestle with *wicked problems* – problems that are difficult to solve with linear, planned, and predictable solutions due to constantly changing factors that may not easily be seen at the surface. Because of the constant changing requirements of complex interdependencies, efforts to solve one aspect of a problem may reveal other problems (Grint, 2005). These *wicked* problems do not have right or wrong answers, but rather better or worse alternatives. There is a pressing need for organizational leaders to understand and deal effectively with this new order of organizational problems that defy traditional problem-solving strategies (Burke, 2014; Grint, 2005; Senge, 2006).

Grint (2005) said that “wicked problems require leadership” (p. 1473). Organizational leaders struggle with operating in today's complex and digital era with efficiency and effectiveness and often need the support of external consultants. It is difficult for organizational leaders to rewire their brain from their old business knowledge in order to lead in today's complex systems (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The overload of information within the increasingly complex information era further complicates the leadership strategies and choices resulting in organizational leaders seeking the expertise of external OD professionals. OD consultants are hired for their OD expertise and knowledge so they can help organizational leaders create opportunities to improve the speed and quality of their decisions and performance that impact the organization (Block, 2000; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995).

Grint (2005) said that “wicked problems require leadership” (p. 1473). Organizational leaders struggle with operating in today’s complex and digital era with efficiency and effectiveness and often need the support of external consultants. It is difficult for organizational leaders to rewire their brain from their old business knowledge in order to lead in today’s complex systems (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The overload of information within the increasingly complex information era further complicates the leadership strategies and choices resulting in organizational leaders seeking the expertise of external OD professionals. OD consultants are hired for their OD expertise and knowledge so they can help organizational leaders create opportunities to improve the speed and quality of their decisions and performance that impact the organization (Block, 2000; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995).

Organizational leaders today require models of leadership that are collaborative, system focused, and inclusive (Schein, 2006; Senge, 2006; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Twenty first century organizations need leader who think differently about what it means to be a leader and how to effectively lead in today’s increasingly complex organizations with their *wicked* problems. Today more than ever organizational leaders must be adaptable, open-minded, transformative, and emotionally intelligent as they facilitate and enhance collaboration among key stakeholders to better understand and build capacity for change.

The OD consultant’s role is that of a leader to helps build capacity for change and become more effective and efficient in today’s digital and complex world. In this study, the focus of OD consulting will be collaboration that relies on Edgar Schein’s (1988) model of *process consultation*. That is, the OD consultant engages in a joint process with their clients throughout their practice beginning with the diagnosis of the problem. Schein (1988) argued the importance of the consulting *process* right from the beginning. Because the consultant will not

have a lot of information as they first enter the site, they rely heavily on the information shared by the clients. Therefore, consultants need to explore their clients' needs in-depth as they vary widely about clients' ability to identify and articulate their needs. Because of the complexity of working with different clients, consultants must be aware of and able to use different strategies. It is important not only to better understand these different strategies but also to use these strategies that impact the relationship with the clients (Block, 2011; Burke, 1994; Cumming & Worley, 2009; Schein, 2006). Moreover, the needs of an organization and employees may shift throughout the process of consulting, thus necessitating the consultant's flexibility in shifting approaches throughout the engagement. Accurately analyzing a client's needs is imperative to achieving client satisfaction, and oftentimes that satisfaction is what attracts future business.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the approaches that successful organization development consultants use throughout their engagements with their clients. More specifically, the study will attempt to identify the important components that impact the relationship between consultants and clients as well as the strategies they use to add value to their clients and contribute to ongoing growth of their organizational development. The ultimate goal is to help clients become more effective and efficient.

### **Significance of the Study**

Today's global economy and digital era has created a competitive landscape where change, ambiguity, and uncertainty are the new norms for organizations. Worldwide, people are inundated with an overwhelming amount of information available at one's fingertips, which ultimately impacts the way people, including educators, politicians, or entrepreneurs, think, act,

and lead. “Information is becoming the engine, resource, and commodity that drive the economy and social institutions, as well as our personal and professional lives” (Crane et al., 2012). It is time we recognize that living with a “vulnerable present and an uncertain future” is going to be a permanent condition (Block, 2011, xv). Given the changes within technology, markets, and regulations, organizations have no other choice but to quickly adapt to thrive in the chaos present in today’s unpredictable and complex market conditions.

As the organizational world and systems continuously change in today’s technology driven world, business leaders need to learn how to cope with the fast paced changes not only to survive, but also to enhance an organization’s capacity for success (Senge, 2006; Tapscott, 2011). However, many organizations don’t have the skills or resources necessary to respond to the rapidly changing, complex, and uncertainty of today’s world alone. As a result, there is a high demand for consultants to assist organizational leaders to lead their organizations for sustainable and long-term results. Consulting today is no longer simply about assisting organizations to solve their short term problems. Consultants today must go beyond simply providing advice by helping leaders develop skills to efficiently and effectively lead in today’s digital and complex systems (Buono et al., 2011; Crane et al., 2012). Consulting today requires helping organizations develop the right strategic direction and approaches to ensure that changes are run smoothly and successfully and yield long-lasting benefits. Consultants must work with business leaders to build a culture of learning so that they build internal capacity to manage and adapt to ongoing organizational change, which is unavoidable in the workplace today (Buono et al., 2011; Crane et al., 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Understanding the strategies consultants use during their work with their clients will benefit future leaders to enhance their organizational practices.

## **Research Questions**

Patton (2002) recommended the use of qualitative interviewing when the perspective of the participants is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. More specifically, when conducting phenomenological research, it is essential that research questions have definite characteristics and reveal the “essence and meanings of human experience; it is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, and vivid and accurate renderings of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). The purpose of this study is not to seek an absolute explanation, but rather to collect in-depth descriptions and interpret the meanings of the lived phenomena of organizational development consulting. The overarching research question is stated as follows: How do expert OD consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success?

Stemming from the primary research question are three ancillary questions:

- 1) What key strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process of identifying and addressing clients’ (organization’s) needs?
- 2) What is the overall consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention?
- 3) How do OD consultants’ approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research is the most appropriate for this study as it provides an opportunity to further investigate a complex and multidimensional issue through gaining a deeper understanding of effective strategies used by successful practicing consultants. Qualitative research approaches are useful in collecting data rich in detail needed to understand better a

phenomenon. Marshall and Rossman (2011) pointed out that qualitative research can be focused on an individual's lived experiences. Because this study seeks to describe and understand in-depth the experiences of practicing expert consultants, a qualitative research design was selected to capture the complexity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) of participants' experiences through their perceptions.

In this study, I sought to determine the factors perceived as the most effective in the consultants' work with clients. In-depth interviewing was the data collection method used in this study to explore the perspectives of selected successful consultants in order to determine which factors are perceived as the most effective in consultants' work with clients. The use of in-depth interviewing allowed the researcher to seek a deeper understanding of the first-hand, insider knowledge of practicing consultants whose insight may help leaders in the future.

In-depth interviewing and field notes were the data collection methods used for this study. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that entails conducting interviews with specific individuals to explore their perspectives on a particular phenomenon, situation, or experience. Patton (2002) recommended the use of qualitative interviewing when the perspective of the participants is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. The use of in-depth interviewing was valuable in helping understand better, by first-hand insider knowledge of successful consultants, the factors that contribute to the field of OD including the education field. The use of an interview as an approach helped enhance understanding of the experiences and realities of the participants by allowing their voices to be heard (Patton, 2002). Field notes as an observational protocol helped capture descriptive and reflective information about the participants during the interview sessions.

To obtain a sample of participants, several local networks and associations were contacted. These existing local networks were acquired through prior affiliations with ASTD and the Department of Continuing Education at the University of North Florida to identify prominent and highly recognized consultants within the metropolitan Jacksonville area. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location most convenient for the participant, and were conducted April 22 through May 12, 2014. Interviews lasted between 90 minutes to three hours and were audio-recorded using two devices and transcribed thereafter. Fifteen consultants were identified. Because data saturation was reached after seven interviews, I decided not to include all of the other participants identified for the study. Efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants throughout the study.

Methods used throughout data analysis included (a) *a priori coding*, (b) *open coding*, (c) *in vivo coding*, and (d) *axial coding*. To ensure credibility of findings, I used (a) member checking, (b) cross participant triangulation, (c) thick-rich descriptions, (d) negative case analysis, and (e) journaling.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

*Change management:* is defined as the process of planning, guiding, and facilitating changes needed to enhance organizations' practices for better performance and effectiveness (Cumming and Worley, 2009).

*Change agent:* is the external consultant who drives change within the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1991; Cumming and Worley, 2001).

*Organization Development:* "A planned effort led by managers to achieve long-range and organization-wide goals, supported from the top and designed to increase organizational

effectiveness through planned interventions in the organization's processes, particularly through a more collaborative management of organizational culture, using the consultant-facilitator role, applied behavioral science theory, with an emphasis on developing human potential and scientific approaches that supplement practical experiences” (Jackson, 2006, p. 25).

*Organization Development Consultant:* is the organizational development practitioner hired by organizations to help address problems within the organization, and guide the organization through necessary efforts to enhance organizational practices and have long-lasting results.

*Organizational effectiveness:* “is the extent to which organizations realize and can achieve their goals” (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983).

*Process consultation:* is defined as “building a relationship through a continuous effort of jointly deciphering what is going on in the ongoing interaction, relationship, and situation to make coauthored choices” (Schein, 1991a, p. 6).

*Wicked Problems:* are complex problems that often require unlinear solutions. They are rooted in complex issues, and may result in a delay in decisions. They often generate other problems, and require leadership (Grint, 2005).

### **Summary and Organization of the Study**

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, the context of the issue, along with an explicit statement of the problem and research question. Additionally, this chapter included a discussion of the purpose and significance of the study, methods and procedures for conducting the study, and definitions of potentially ambiguous terms used within the present study.

Chapter II presents a review of the related literature and an explanation of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. The review begins with an introduction to organizational development (OD), including historical and current perspective, and is followed by foundational theories related to OD. In the next section, I discuss the process of consultation for OD in more detail and address historical and current perspectives and practices. In the third section, three different theoretical models of consulting processes are described, followed by a discussion of empirical research related to the process of consulting. Finally, secondary constructs and models that inform conceptualizing of process consultation are described.

Chapter III includes a justification of how the qualitative paradigm aligns with my pursuit of knowledge and understanding through the present study. The chapter also includes methods for data collection and analysis, my role as a researcher, issues related to credibility and trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapter IV includes descriptions of the processes involved in analyzing the data. In this chapter, findings are also presented through the emergence of critical themes. Primary and secondary themes that emerged in direct alignment with the research questions will be further detailed and described using the words of the participants.

Finally, chapter V serves to summarize the entire research process, as well as a discussion of the findings as they answer the study's original research questions. Additionally, this chapter includes implications for practitioners and recommendations for future empirical studies.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the process that expert OD consultants use during their work with their clients. In this study, I sought to understand the most effective strategies organizational development (OD) consultants use as they help their clients meet the ongoing demands of today's complex, global, digital era.

Leading organizations in today's complex and digital era is not an easy task. Organizational leaders lack the knowledge, skills, or resources necessary to respond to the radical changes resulting from the global information age. As a result, OD consultants are in high demand to support organizational leaders through these challenges related to change, ambiguity, and uncertainty of today's competitive world (Block, 2011; Cumming & Worley, 2009; Jackson, 2006; Quade & Brown, 2002). These complexities result in *wicked problems* within intertwined systems where linear solutions no longer meet the needs of the organization (Grint, 2005). OD consultants not only help organizations assess their current reality and processes to solve short-term problems in order to survive within the competitive market, but they also act as leaders who help build the organization's capacity to develop skills and knowledge to become better equipped for today's rapidly changing and competitive business environments.

More than ever before, there is an increasing need in the literature, research, and among practitioners of effective OD practices needed to survive in today's complex global business world. While many suggestions for improving OD and OD consulting can be found in popular industry books, rarely do they emerge from research and in-depth study. In fact, even among the literature, there is a lack of consensus on the definition and description of OD. When discussing OD, concepts related to systems thinking, process consultation, complexity, and collaboration are often discussed. Most simplistically, OD can be defined as planned interventions through a

collaborative and system-wide effort aimed to enhance the processes within organizations so that they function more efficiently and effectively (Beckard, 1969; Block, 2011; Cumming & Huse, 1898, Cumming & Worley, 2009; Jackson, 2006; Senge, 1990).

In this study, foundational theories relevant to the study will be discussed in more detail. More specifically, the areas that require further review include: an understanding of organizational development (OD), systems theory, organizational culture, organizational learning, organizational change, and process consulting models. These bodies of literature are necessary to clarify the purpose and significance of the study, understand the conceptual framework, and to critique effectively the literature related to the study. This literature review will examine theoretical OD perspectives that contribute to the framework from which my study will be constructed. The chapter will conclude with a presentation and discussion of a concept map and summary.

### **Organization Development**

Organization development (OD) is a system-wide approach of implementing effective organizational development and change. OD is an evolving field of practice that draws from many different disciplines in an attempt to manage real life organizational problems and plan for most effective results (Tolbert, 2004). OD has drawn from fields of study and discipline including human resource development, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, economics, management, and industrial engineering (Burke, 1994; Ruona & Gibson, 2004, Tolbert, 2004).

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that there is no consensus on how OD is described or defined. OD is described by different individuals as a process, a theory, a field of

study, and a profession (Burke, 1994; French & Bell, 1999; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995; Schein, 2006; Vaill, 1989).

A study conducted by Egan in 2002 yielded 27 different definitions. The definition offered by Cumming and Huse (1989) is one of the most basic: OD is “a process by which behavioral science knowledge and practices are used to help organizations achieve greater effectiveness, improved quality of work life, and increased productivity” (p. 1). Cummings and Worley (1997) specified the goal of OD as enhancing the development and reinforcement of organizational “strategies, structures, and processes” (p.2). French and Bell (1999) defined OD as a “long-term effort, led and supported by top management, to improve an organization’s visioning, empowerment, learning, and problem-solving processes through a collaborative management of organizational culture” (p. 28). Beckhard’s (1969) definition included the terms “organization-wide” and “planned” (p. 9). The definition offered by Jackson (2006) combines several components from other definitions:

A planned effort led by managers to achieve long-range and organization-wide goals, supported from the top and designed to increase organizational effectiveness through planned interventions in the organization’s processes, particularly through a more collaborative management of organizational culture, using the consultant-facilitator role, applied behavioral science theory, with an emphasis on developing human potential and scientific approaches that supplement practical experience. (p. 24)

Given the description of OD, it is important to also understand and explain components of organizational effectiveness. Effectiveness is the extent to which organizations realize and can achieve their goals (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). Therefore, in OD, it becomes important to help organizations facilitate ways by which they achieve goals and objectives.

In reviewing the literature and definitions of OD, several themes were apparent. The themes include the systems thinking, change intervention and management, impact on organizational culture, need for collaborative diagnosis, dialogue, and intervention strategies. The literature also points to the various schools of thought fundamental to OD approaches and the various OD practitioner models.

More specific to this study, OD consulting plays a unique role in leading successful change in organizations. By applying theoretical models and implementing specific solutions, OD consultants can help foster development and growth within organizations and build their capacity to be prepared for sustainable change. Consultants' roles can be powerful as they help move their clients from an unaware unconscious state to becoming informed, knowledgeable, and intentionally and consciously aware of the choices they make to reach more effective desired outcomes (Quade & Brown, 2002).

### **Historical Perspectives**

Having contributed to studies related to group dynamics and action research, Kurt Lewin is often considered the father of OD (Quade & Brown, 2002; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). Although the concept was first introduced by Lewin, *Organization Development* as a term and practice did not emerge until the 1950's by Douglas McGregor and Richard Beckhard (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). Lewin's work contributed to the field of consultant client relationships. McGregor and Beckhard described OD as an "innovative bottoms-up change effort that fit no traditional consulting categories" (Weisbord, 1985, p. 112).

Early thinking about organization development and change began in the 1940's with scholars such as Kurt Lewin, Kenneth Benne, Leland Bradford, and Ronald Lippitt (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). They began their work with a focus on laboratory training.

Laboratory training is associated with unstructured, small group sessions in which participants share their experiences and learn from their interactions (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995).

Laboratory Training was designed to help participants learn from their experiences by spontaneously responding to an unstructured and ambiguous hypothetical situation. Through the practice of listening, observing, and interacting with other group members in such situations, participants have the opportunity to learn about themselves as well as issues related to leadership and various other factors such as systems, communication, and how structures emerge in such groups (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995).

It is important to note that these early laboratory training sessions consisted of participants from different organizations, which soon posed a problem for behavioral scientists. They noticed that the participants struggled with transferring their “insights and behavioral changes to their work lives” (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005, p. 27). Because of the difficulty in transferring that knowledge and learning into actual practice, laboratory training changed to focus on single organizations. This technique has now evolved into the term, understanding, and practice of *team building* within organizations (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005).

The second application contributing to OD refers to the processes of action research and survey feedback. Beginning with the 1940's, the development of action research began with studies conducted by social scientists such as John Collier, Kurt Lewin, and William Whyte (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005). The basis for this work was that there was a need for research to be highly correlated to action in order for improvements and change to occur. One of the key components of action research was the systematic collection of survey data as a means to provide feedback to the organization and encourage joint planning toward improving specific aspects within the organization (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005).

More specifically, Renis Likert had a significant influence on OD by focusing on collecting information from members of an organization and using the findings as a basis for problem solving and collaborative action planning. His work contributed to more employee centered practices. His technique is referred to as *survey research and feedback*, a systematic approach to collecting survey data (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005). This scientific method was meant to help collect information about organizations in an attempt to identify the areas that needed improvement, otherwise known as the organizations' problems. Likert's research demonstrated that organizational effectiveness based on survey research requires actually discussing the results of the survey and jointly planning for solutions. Moreover, there is a need for top managers to be actively involved in establishing an action plan to address the problems or weaknesses identified via the survey results (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005).

Although the field of behavioral and social science has been valuable in providing the basic foundations for the study and practice of OD, it is argued that OD is more of an multidisciplinary field drawing from various disciplines. OD thinking and practices have been impacted by theories of sociology, psychology, motivation, learning, personality, and leadership (Burke, 1994).

### **Current Perspective**

Today, the OD profession seems to be at a crossroads (Quade & Brown, 2002). The various professional organizations have encountered a degree of ambiguity regarding their purpose and practice. The field is defined by techniques. However, the values guiding the field are not fully defined. Moreover, given the competitive nature of the field, there does not seem to be unity among professionals. Consulting seems to be more of a competitive practice with a lot of secrets regarding effective strategies.

The theoretical underpinnings from earlier decades are now being translated into OD practice. Organizations today must be constantly transforming in order to adequately meet the challenges of the rapidly changing and competitive environment. Unlike a few decades ago, simply solving organizational issues based on linear, planned, and predictable solutions no longer works in today's market (Burke, 2014; Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005). Moreover, many business organizations do not survive as long as they may have in the past (Burke, 2014). The study of OD now focuses more on understanding, leading, and managing organizational change efforts (Burke, 2014). There is a need for organizations to prepare to deal with chaos, complexities, and intertwined issues that exist within organizational systems that result in unexpected outcomes (Burke, 2014; Quade & Brown, 2002; Senge, 2006).

The best way to plan for the turbulent and chaotic environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to find new ways to respond to future challenges (Beer & Nohria, 2000). The pace of change today is much faster than it was in the past, and thus organizations need to learn ways to deal with today's faster pace of change (Burke, 2014). Current literature on organizational development focuses on the notion of stabilization and sustainability related to change (Burke, 2014; Senge, 2006). Because the future is unknown, one way to prepare for the change of future is to build capacity for change. Collaborative learning and leadership are the forefront of OD strategies to help organizations build the capacity needed to survive in today's fast-paced, complex, competitive, digital and unpredicted global market (Block, 2008; Burke, 2014; Senge, 2006). OD practitioners need to be experts on the process and have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the organizational dynamics within which they work within.

## **Foundational Theories of Organization Development**

In order to survive in today's ever fast-changing, complex, and competitive business environment, organizations must develop strategies to become prepared for ongoing change. The literature on organizational development (OD) focuses on OD as a system-wide approach in assessing and intervening within organizations. OD efforts help build capacity within the organization so that they are better prepared for change. Understanding and assessing the culture of the organization prior to initiating change is an essential component to OD. Successful OD efforts also require building a culture of ongoing learning as a core element to survival and sustainability. In this section, several important concepts related to OD will be further described including systems theory, organizational culture, organizational change and learning.

### **Complexity and System Theory**

Organizations today are complex and require a different of thinking and leading. Different from traditional leadership approaches, a more recent leadership theory draws from complexity science of social complex systems. This form of leadership, referred to as *complexity leadership theory* (CLT) defines leadership as a system function that accounts for the human interaction dynamics within complex systems (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). With complexity theory, the importance of exploring the nature of interactions and adaptations in systems and their influence on behaviors, patterns, innovations, and interactions are emphasized. Advocates of complexity theory advise leaders to create their organization's capacity for change by "identifying and exploring strategies and behaviors that foster organizational and subunit creativity, learning, and adaptability..." (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Using a more collaborative mindset, CLT considers leadership an "entangled" role including three types of leadership: administrative, adaptive, and enabling, all of which interact

within the “complex adaptive systems” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 299). Leadership occurs within these subsystems that are complex and adaptive. In other words, leadership within open social systems is now among the connections and between organizational members.

Complexity generally refers to a high degree of complication and systematic interdependence. Systems Theory provides a general analytic framework to help understand organizations and their complexities (French & Bell, 1999, Senge, 1990). Beginning with the 1950's, Ludwig von Bertalanffy was the first to offer this comprehensive view of organizations. Systems theory was a new way of conceptualizing and studying organizations. It was designed to deal with complexity by taking a holistic view based on examining the collective actions and outcomes that emerge from the interactions and actions of the individuals within the collective system.

Katz and Kahn (1978) were the first to apply the theory to organizations. They provided the intellectual foundations needed to understand the dynamics of organizations and organization change. They conveyed that human organizations are open systems as they are interconnected and interrelated with environmental structures and factors. Systems theory views human organizations as open systems made up of parts that are interconnected and interdependent of one another which impact the organization as a whole. In organizations, sub-systems can include individuals, the organization, a division, a department, or even a project group (Senge, 1990). These interrelated and interconnected parts are in a cycle of continuous change as they interact with one another within the boundaries of the environmental contexts. Any type of movement or activity, no matter how small or large impacts the organization as a whole. This may include change or intervention in processes, structures, groups, cliques, or norms. Systems theory points

out that the various elements within organizations do not work in isolation and thus continuously interact and affect one another.

It is important for subsystems to be aligned to the goal and with one another to benefit the entire system. Alignment requires having the understanding of how the system and subsystems interact. In addition to seeing the whole picture, one way of understanding the system is to identify the underlying patterns, events, and trends (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Yoon & Kuchinke, 2005). Given that alignment is an ongoing activity and can never be fully attained, it is important for organizations and their leaders to be involved in a process of monitoring that is ongoing. More importantly, OD practitioners must be aware of these changes in order to develop most effective and appropriate strategies.

Donald Schon also contributed to the growth and development of system-oriented approaches to OD (1978). Because of the intertwined elements within organizations, Schon identified reflection and learning as important components in OD strategies. People may have different mental maps which guide their actions in organizations, and therefore, it is essential to examine these mental maps as future actions are taken to enhance the effectiveness of the organization

Peter Senge, one of the modern contributors to system theory, outlined that one way to identify patterns is to begin by understanding the pattern of “feedback” (Senge, 2006, p 73). Feedback refers to the actions that either reinforce or counteract each other. By identifying these patterns, the types of structures that occur continuously over time can be better understood. Senge said that identifying and understanding these patterns help build a common language that is rich for describing a myriad of relationships that are connected and patterns of change. Although systems thinking is an important problem-solving tool, it is also “powerful as a

language, augmenting, and changing the way we think and talk about complex issues” (Senge, 1990, p. 88).

### **Organizational Culture**

In order to further deepen the understanding of systems and subsystems within an organization, it is necessary to examine the organization through a cultural lens with a focus on values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions of the individuals within the system. *Culture* is defined as the “basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously” and are “learned responses to a group’s problems of survival” (Schein, 1988, p. 6). Culture is a concept that is very complex, yet an influential attribute to change. Schein (1988, 2006) defined different levels of organizational culture based on various cultural elements such as:

...physical layout of an organization’s office, rules of interaction that are taught to newcomers, basic values that come to be seen as the organization’s ideology or philosophy, and underlying assumptions that enable people to communicate or interpret everyday occurrences. (p. 13)

More specifically, Schein’s (1988, 2006) three levels of organizational culture include artifacts and behaviors, espoused values, and assumptions – all of which must be identified and understood in order to drive change initiatives that are effective and sustainable. Artifacts are the most visible level of the culture, and are apparent in the physical and social environment.

The value element of culture involves the values of the members within the organizations. These are group values and beliefs that have been established over time. Examples of these included mission statements or statements of employee excellence (Schein, 1999). Values are often conscious and are explicitly stated within the organization, typically by the

leaders. More specifically, they “serve the normative or moral function of guiding members of the group in how to deal with certain key situations” (Schein, 1995, p. 16). Argyris and Schon (1978) referred to this as *espoused values* which predict and prescribe people’s actions in given situations.

The basic underlying assumptions refer to the elements of culture that are not seen and often unexamined (Schein, 1999). These include many of the unspoken rules that are often not at the conscious level, and thus not discussed within organizations. These basic underlying assumptions are often only understood by those who have been in the organization for a sufficient amount of time, and who have become acclimated to them. Because these assumptions are ingrained, they are the most invisible, and therefore the most difficult to change.

Argyris (1976) referred to Schein’s underlying assumptions level of culture as *theories-in-use*. These *theories-in-use* are the beliefs that drive a person’s professional practice. These theories are often “nonconfrontable and nondebatable” (Schein, 1985, p. 18), and therefore very difficult to reexamine and change. People often give explanations to these theories to justify their actions to both themselves and others, a term Argyris referred to as *espoused theories*. Espoused theories often conflict with theories in use. These *espoused theories*, what we actually see or hear within organizations are on the surface level and may be in conflict with the deep core values of individuals and the organization. When there is a mismatch between the perceptions of the espoused values and the reality of the basic assumptions of the organizational culture, the results can be very detrimental to the individuals and the organization (Argyris, 1976). Therefore, an essential step in OD practice becomes helping employees recognize the mismatch between what they say they believe (espoused theories) and the way they operate (theories in use).

Before any intervention is initiated, it is essential for the underlying assumptions to be examined and understood (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Schein, 1999). As the change agent, the OD consultant must help the organization to assess its culture. Assessing culture requires a lot of time inside the organization to really examine how participants interpret symbols and attach meaning to actions and events (Heifetz, 2009; Schein, 1999).

### **Organizational Change and Learning**

Organizational change is essential for success in today's business world. Therefore, the capability of the organization to adapt to change has a significant impact on its vitality and effectiveness (Armenakis & Burdick, 1988). A review of literature demonstrates that OD research and practice have been focused on managing change in organizations (Beckhard, 1969; Bennis, 1969; Burke, 1982). More specifically, Cummings and Worley (2009) claimed that OD approaches rely on planned change. In addition to planned change, there is a need to build the capacity of the people within the organization by teaching them the necessary skills and knowledge to be prepared for and survive in today's world of ongoing change.

Golembiewski et al., (1976) posited that there is a need to understand the varying degrees of change in order to better examine and understand the shift in human thoughts and behavior as a result of change. Three levels of change, included *alpha change*, *beta change*, and *gamma change* help assess cognitive change within people. *Alpha change* speaks to the actual change in the task or system, specifically the shift from the state prior to and after the change. Alpha change is more visible and therefore helps quantify change incrementally. *Beta change* goes beyond just the task, and it takes into account change that also affects the people. This may include the viewpoints and thoughts of the participants regarding the state of change prior to and after the event. Because beta change is less visible, it is important to assess and understand the

opinions and viewpoints of individuals to help better understand their biases and realities. *Gamma change* speaks to the changes that affect the task, people, and the structure of the organization. Gamma change is a more radical approach involving a redefinition or re-conceptualization of the process (Golembiewski et al., 1976). In other words, this is a shift in dimensions of how reality is perceived. Anderson (2010) provided more recent terminologies for the various levels, and referred to them as *developmental change*, *transitional change*, and *transformational change*. Regardless of the stage or form of change, there is a level of cognitive change and learning that occurs within the people experiencing or guiding the change.

Historically, many OD intervention strategies were focused on change process that were planned to best fit the predictable patterns within the organizations (Burke, 2014; Yoon & Kuchinke, 2005). However, the increased complexity of the interconnected issues faced by business organizations today makes it difficult to focus only on developing set solutions for the identified issues. The traditional approach to problem solving where one aspect of the system is fixed before moving on to another is not an effective strategy. This approach leaves organizations unprepared to effectively manage the issues created by the fast paced environment that business organizations are working under (Quade & Brown, 2002). Consistent with systems thinking, organizations are nonlinear and are made up of interconnected elements, including *wicked problems* and choices that are interrelated that may lead to unexpected results (Grint, 2005; Senge, 2006). Moreover, organizations are struggling to meet the demands of the complex global markets. As external facilitators, OD consultants must provide insight into the organization's current situation and help them build necessary strategies to identify their own developmental needs and manage change needed for ever-lasting results (Beer & Nohria, 2000). This may involve developing potential and resources among internal talent, unblocking

communication obstacles among employees, and building a culture that welcomes rather than blocks change.

According to Rothwell and Sullivan (2005), organization change is one of the “greatest challenges in modern organizational life” (p. 16). Thus, managing change is a critical piece in organizational development, especially for those leading organizations or the change within them (Armenakis & Burdick, 1988). Within OD literature, a lot of attention has been placed on ways in which change could be planned, managed, and implemented. These approaches refer to the concept of *change management*. *Change management* is defined as the process of planning, guiding, and facilitating changes needed to enhance organizations’ practices for better performance and effectiveness (Cummings and Worley, 2009). The process of change management begins with building leadership capacity within the organizations’ top leaders. Before the change initiative can begin, the OD consultant may need to engage in several developmental activities such as (a) lead self-awareness and self-examination activities with the leadership team to help them identify a clear vision for the company’s future that aligns with their mission, (b) monitor and gather information regarding the organization’s current environment including the needs of the internal and external clients, (c) establish and explicitly identify a need for change, and (d) provide clarity of the vision and direction for change among other levels of the organization (Burke, 2014).

Tapscott and Williams (2007) asserted that it is difficult for leaders to rewire their brain from using the knowledge and skills that once worked and capitalize on what the new world can offer through collaboration. Through being *open, peering, sharing, and acting globally*, organizational leaders can accumulate and expand knowledge and innovate for better and long-lasting results. OD consultants can facilitate this new level of flexibility and thinking within an

open system among organizational leaders to help them build the right structure and governance needed for effectiveness and efficiency within the organization.

Without building a culture of organizational learning as a core element, organizations will struggle surviving the rapid whirlwind of constant and future changes. Many theorists have emphasized the importance of learning during the consulting process (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1991; Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986, Senge, 1990, Schein, 2004). With today's complex and fast-changing business environments, organizations will not survive unless they change their pace of learning and learn as fast as the environment changes. It has been said that there are benefits to organizations that learn and act within a flexible outlook. Some argue that learning organizations lead to innovation, which then results in productivity, thus sustaining an organization with a competitive advantage (Argyris, 2006; Grint, 2005; Senge, 2006; Tapscott, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). According to Senge (1990), organizational learning is "the creation of new patterns of thinking beyond survival or maintenance, but instead generative, [having] the capacity to create, innovate, and generate the new knowledge from present knowledge (p. 14).

As the capacity for learning increases in an organization, the ability of its members to apply learning also increases (Senge, 2006). This concept is best described by the learning organization model which was developed to embed systematic learning into the organization. Organizational learning contributes to organizational development and performance. More specifically, it promotes learning about past and current experiences to better guide future activity and maintain a balance between what was and what could be (Gnyawali & Grant, 1997). This balance between the two states also helps build a culture of learning. Senge (1990) coined the term *learning organizations* which is a type of organization that implements organizational learning. He compared learning organizations and organization-wide learning by saying:

A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create reality. And how they can change it. Organization-wide learning involves change in culture and change in the most basic managerial practices, not just within a company, but within a whole system management. (p. 13)

The *learning organization* is defined as an organization that continuously learns and adapts itself. The learning of individual members and teams is important to a learning organization. Having a system within the organization that focuses on learning at all levels helps build an organizational system that focuses on collaboration and sharing of knowledge (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Grint, 2005; Senge, 1990; Tapscott & Williams, 2007). This interconnected way of thinking helps organizations better tackle the challenges presented within the competitive business industry.

Although a lot of research has been done on the benefits of organizational learning, not all organizations share or utilize that belief. According to Argyris and Schon (1978), organizational learning is based on two beliefs which impact the organization's movement toward learning. The first, reactive organizations believe that simply adjusting themselves to change at times of conflict and struggles is merely enough. On the other end of the spectrum, the proactive organization creates a culture of problem solving for future and ongoing needs.

Learning has also been identified as a behavior that helps resolve the dissonance between conflicts and expectations (Argyris & Schon, 1978). According to Argyris (2006), two types of learning exist: single- or double-loop learning. In single-loop learning, actions are modified based on the dissonance between the expectations (based on underlying assumptions or values) and obtained outcome. In single-loop learning, the obvious and immediate issues are dealt with. In this type of learning, the basic assumptions or values are not affected or changed, and thus the

actions are merely as a result of the current issue on the surface level (Argyris, 1982). Without examining the underlying assumptions or roots of the problem, then the organization enters a cycle of error and correction that may not be effective or a result of the true challenge. Argyris and Schon (1978) described single-loop learning with an example:

Single-loop learning is like a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and turns the heat on or off. The thermostat can perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and take corrective action. (pp 2-3)

According to Argyris and Schon (1991), organizations may operate in a defensive mode and attempt to avoid embarrassments, which result in single-loop learning. In such cases, they tend to include patterns of communication that do not illicit positive feedback or assessment of deeper issues within the organization. Rather, they focus on solutions to problems on the surface level rather than focusing on the deeper values, honest feedback, and ineffective patterns (Argyris, 2006).

Double-loop learning on the hand further examines the underlying goals, assumptions, systems, and strategies that lead the organizational actions (Argyris, 1982). In double-loop learning, the values, assumptions, policies, and practices of the organizations are assessed and modified. Argyris (1982) argued that the foundation of a learning organization is double-loop learning.

Argyris (1994) recognized that double-loop learning can't occur if the environment is not one that allows the members to examine the basic values and assumptions. According to Senge (1990), it is up to the leader to help nurture people's capacity for continuous learning at all levels. It is important for leaders to recognize the importance of continuous learning and build a culture that allows such practice (Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) further explained that

“organizations will enter a new domain of leadership development when we stop thinking about preparing a few people for the top and start nurturing the potential for leaders at all levels to participate in shaping new realities” (p. 568). A learning organization’s capacity for continuous learning is contingent on communication and collaboration (Senge, 1990). Effective leaders encourage the engagement of collaborative learning as it results in a culture of innovative and creative solutions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

A study conducted by Rosen and Digh (2001) identified the ability to guide “people successfully through change” (p.1) as one of the top competencies for leaders. Moreover, “change is a requirement for continued success, and competent change leadership is most coveted executive skill” (Rosen & Digh, 2001, p.1). However, organizations are often not equipped adequately enough to manage change that is sustainable without outside assistance (Sorge & Wittenloostujin, 2004). Because of this, organizational change has opened the door to those in the consultancy profession. For major organization-wide changes, companies frequently offer external OD consultants to serve as *change agents*. A *change agent* refers to the person who drives change within an organization (Argyris & Schon, 1991; Cumming and Worley, 2009). Because they are an outsider, OD consultants are not bound by the culture or politics, and are able to bring in different perspectives to the situation and can challenge the status quo. Bringing in a new perspective, OD consultants can help organizations address various business problems which ultimately change processes and relationships within the organizations. As a change agent, the OD consultant may take the role of (a) a researcher as they collect data on the organization’s current practices, (b) as a facilitator as they guide the organization to better prepare for change, (c) as a trainer to help develop specific skill to effect change, and (d) as a counselor as they support the interpersonal and intergroup dynamics and needs of the organization (Argyris, 2006;

Cumming & Worley, 2009; Lippitt & Lippitt, 1986; Rosen and Dign, 2001; Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005).

*Critical research* is one model of change often used in organizational development practices. The underlying assumption in Critical Research is that organizations have certain perspectives or values that may not be consistent with the rational about how decisions should be made, resources used, people managed, or essentially how the organization is run (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005). These assumptions are referred to as *ideologies*. According to Katz and Kahn (1978), ideology can be described as “justification for the organization’s existence and functions” (p. 101). When there is a gap between what people believe should be happening and what they believe is actually happening, tension naturally is developed. The basic notion of CR then becomes identifying that discrepancy and “dramatizing the differences between what should be and actual situations contradicting its ideology” (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995, p. 48). By heightening the tension and pointing out the discrepancy, the need for change becomes more apparent.

### **Leadership Constructs**

In discussing change, Michael Fullan (2001) emphasized the importance of leadership, however not without some challenges. “Change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led but it cannot be controlled. Change can be led...and leadership does make a difference” (pp. 33-44). As organizations change, OD consultants will have to find ways to help organizational leaders integrate more effective strategies enhance the internal organization’s effectiveness and efficiency. Block (2000) stated, “the task of the consultant is increasingly to build the capacity of the clients (p. xviii). As Kouzes and Posner (2007) explained, the most significant contribution leaders make is “to the long term development of people and institutions

so that they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow” (p. xxviii). Leadership is essentially about inspiring people to be effective in fostering and implementing change, and thus OD consultants need to demonstrate exceptional leadership skills to get their clients to collaborate with them in making necessary changes. For the purpose of this study, I chose to focus on aspects of transformational leadership and emotional intelligence as the foundation on which OD consultants build and enhance their leadership.

My review of the literature disclosed several relevant similarities in how leadership and consulting are defined. Bass (1985) identified leadership as the most important component of organizational success or failure. After they are hired, OD consultants work with organizations in order to help them enhance their current system to one that is more efficient and effective. Therefore, it is imperative that they practice effective leadership skills to help enhance organizational practices.

### **Transformational Leadership**

The literature on leadership today calls for more transformational models of leadership to better guide strategies within the fast-past digital era where change is no longer predictable. Originally developed by Burns (1978), and later expanded by Bass (1985), the theory of transformational leadership helped inform leadership behaviors necessary to lead organizational change and development. With this model, the focus was on the development of the follower, in our case, the client (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders exert idealized influence by displaying behaviors that lead to relationships that are built off of trust. OD consultants need to display such attributes in order to build those trustworthy relationships with their clients.

Considering individual’s needs for achievement and growth are other important aspects of leadership (Bass, 1985). As leaders, OD consultants must be cognizant of their clients’ needs

for achievement and growth. Different clients may have different needs, and thus OD consultants must accurately assess and monitor their clients' needs as they create learning opportunities for their development.

It is important for OD consultants as transformational leaders to demonstrate intellectual stimulation as another practice that enhances leadership (Bass, 1985). By establishing an environment of collaboration, the OD consultants help stimulate intellectual creativity within their clients as they challenge them to become innovative and creative. As leaders, OD consultants examine and question the underlying assumptions of their clients and help them re-frame the problems in a way that makes more sense. By including their clients in the problem solving process, they are building a culture that becomes innovative and strategic in dealing with ongoing systematic issues. They teach their clients to learn ways to develop new approaches to solve old problems.

Adapted from transformational leadership, *authentic transformational leadership* expanded on the attributes of transformational leadership by adding an emphasis on reflection (Bass, 1999). For transformational leaders to be authentic, they must reflect and better understand their thoughts, beliefs, and actions, as well as the reasons behind their decisions. Through their process consultation, OD consultants support their clients as they guide them through these transformational processes.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence is an essential to consulting. With roots dating back to the 1920's, emotional intelligence has recently gained a lot of attention and support from the business world through the work of Goleman (1998, 2006). In 1920, Thorndike had first discussed "social intelligence" as the ability to understand and manage men and women. Argyris referred to this

same concept as “interpersonal competence” (1962). In 1990, Salovey and Mayer expanded that definition by labeling the phrase as “emotional intelligence” to include awareness and understanding of oneself and others, while having the ability to manage emotions and relationships. They developed a model of emotional intelligence comprised of four components including a) identifying emotions, b) using emotions to direct the thought, c) understanding emotions, and d) managing the emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Goleman helped facilitate understanding of emotional intelligence through his bestselling book, *Emotional Intelligence* (2006). According to Goleman, many change efforts within organizations fail due to managers’ lack the necessary skills to effectively manage social challenges. Being emotionally intelligent means having the specific personal and social competencies. The personal competencies which relate to self management capabilities include self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation (Goleman, 1998). The social competencies which relate to management of relationships include empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1998).

Being an effective consultant means being emotionally intelligent (Northhouse, 2007). These descriptions of what Quade and brown (2002) referred to as a “conscious consultant” as they manage their roles with their clients (p. xxxvii). Consciously aware and emotionally intelligent consultants are aware of their current state, knowledge, thoughts, and behaviors and can detect how their behaviors impact their clients. Moreover, they know how to manage their emotions to most effectively impact the relationship with others (Goleman, 1998).

It is important for a consultant to develop skills which allow them to appropriately handle the emotions, frustrations, and pressures of their role (Quatro, Walden, and Galvin, 2007). Consultants often begin their work with the leadership team, and then cascade down to others within the organization. Therefore, they not only manage the leadership team, but also the

audience of those leaders. Consultants must know how to manage their own emotions so that they can better inspire, motivate, and energize all those with whom they work (Goleman, 1995; Quatro et al., 2007).

### **Process of Consultation for Organization Development**

As organizations respond to the rapidly changing and competitive environments, they are often poorly equipped to develop and implement effective strategies without external assistance. An outsider can provide support in a number of ways including introducing “new insights or external experience, external legitimacy, or helping to break internal resistance” (Sorge & Van Wittleloostujim, 2013, p. 1207). A primary objective of consulting is to be able to enhance the organization’s own ability to change by providing insight into the current situation and develop a strategic way of forward-thinking to improve the capability of the system. The OD consultant serves as that external support who can help the client organization to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency (Block, 1999; Buono et al, 2011; Burke, 2014; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). As OD practitioners, they are often called upon to assist the leadership team to develop better strategies to deal with a multitude of issues within the organization. The OD consultant is the leader who guides the client organization to build potential and capacity and utilize the acquired skills and knowledge in future situations.

In times of anxiety and uncertainty, typically someone from the executive team within an organization seeks the support of an external consultant. The discomfort experienced because of the anxiety and uncertainty is often referred to cognitive dissonance. Schein (1987, 2006) explained that when the need for change within organization serves as a motivator, cognitive dissonance is experienced at the organizational level. Schein pointed out that in best cases, the

organizations' anxiety for survival must be higher than the learning anxiety. Otherwise, there is resistance to change.

Consulting can be frustrating as consultants must continually manage lateral relationships. As a support person, OD consultants work with organizational leaders who they don't have a direct boss-subordinate relationship with (Block, 2011). This makes it difficult because the OD consultant does not have to obey the demands made by their clients, and vice versa. This results in a lot of ambiguity and calls for negotiation skills. In some situations, OD consultants may need to push the client harder whereas in other situations, there might be a need to rather let go. OD consultants must use appropriate strategies to managing ambiguity and uncertainties.

The consultant's fundamental role is viewed as a specialist who is dedicated to "helping the system to help itself" (Schein, 1988, p. 193) and who "attempts to solve the organization itself in self-diagnosis and enables the organization to give itself sound advice" (Schein, 1988, p. 192). Because the OD consultant is called upon to help the organization develop more effective strategies, it is almost imperative that they have a deep understanding of the organizational system and culture. Additionally, they must be well versed in the various theories regarding change, culture, learning, and systems mentioned earlier in order to utilize the most effective intervention for the specific organization they support.

Organizational Development as a developing field has been criticized for utilizing techniques to solve surface level problems rather than deeper system issues (Argyris, 1993; Burke & Bradford, 2005). For the purpose of this dissertation, I choose to rely and build on the philosophies of Edgar Schein's (1985) Process Consultation. This model emphasizes the importance of the joint and collaborative relationship between the consultant and the client. The

consultant works with the client to help them diagnose and solve their problems rather than simply giving them expert solutions to the problem. In the following sections, I will provide a brief history of consulting, several process consulting models, and the important role of consultants in helping enhance organizational effectiveness.

### **Historical Background**

Prior to the 1990s, the literature on consulting was mainly written by consultants for consultants, mainly in the areas of change and organizational development (Sturdy, Werr, & Buono, 2009). More specifically, from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s, the academic interest in the area of consultancy work focused on the consultant being an expert (Clark, 2002 & Fincham). Consultants were viewed as the major players in the client-consultant relationships, serving primarily that of a professional advisor (Schein, 1999). Their professional duty was to solve concrete client problems with specific scientific theories and techniques associated with their areas of expertise (Schon, 1983).

In the mid to late 1990s, consultants were viewed to be “powerful” with high status and “important” in organizational reform (Sturdy, Werr, & Buono, 2009, p. 247). Consultants viewed themselves as the experts as they helped their clients – those who lacked “sufficient and state-of-the-art knowledge” (Sturdy, Werr, & Buono, 2009, p. 247). Consultants had the ability to translate insight into plans and solutions, while being objective, analytic, skillful, and creative (Kam, 2004; Sturdy, Werr, & Buono, 2009).

As one of the pioneers in the field, Schein (1987) was one of the first people to classify consultation strategies or models into different categories. He identified the categories as the “purchase or consumer model”, the “doctor/patient model”, and the “process consultation model.” I will discuss the process consultation model at a later point.

The “purchase or consumer model” is also known as the expert model. In this model, consultants are hired based on their expertise to solve a problem. In this case, the client identifies the problem then finds a consultant with the appropriate expertise to solve the problem. The consultant’s role is primarily to implement a solution, such as conduct a training program (Armenakis & Burdug, 1988). In this model, the role of consultant simply becomes that of an information supplier rather than being actively involved in the creative or problem-solving process. Often times, if the problem was originally identified accurately by the client, then the consultant delivered on their promise and was able to “fix the problem” (Rockwood, 1993, 636). Otherwise, if the problem was incorrectly diagnosed, the consultant was said to be ineffective (Rockwood, 1993).

The “doctor-patient model” also known as the doctor model focuses mainly on the diagnosis based on the symptoms the organization displays (Schein, 1987). In reviewing this model, Buono (2009) used the analysis of a medical doctor making a diagnosis of an illness based on the symptoms provided by their patients. In this model, the focus is primarily on the problem rather than on the actual process of finding a solution. With the medical model, the control lies primarily with the consultant as they identify the problem, make a diagnosis, and provide a remedy to solve the problem (Rockwood, 1993).

Both the medical and expert model have been severely criticized by scholars and organizational leaders (Schein, 206; Nikolova, 2007). These models presume that the consultant is the expert and has the ability to “give the right advice, in the right way, to the right person and at the right time” (Nikolova, 2007, p. 107). The consultant provides the client with solutions without doing a deep and thorough assessment and examination of the current organization from the viewpoint of the members in that organization. In this model, the clients simply become

passive listeners. Due to the limited interactions between the consultant and client, there is a lack of learning and understanding of the real problems in the organization as well as the client's expectations (Nikolova, 2007; Schon, 1983). The lack of understanding raises questions about the accuracy and appropriateness of the intervention chosen by the consultant (Nikolova, 2007; Schon, 1983; Schein, 2006).

### **Current Perspectives**

Today, the focus has instead been shifted to the collaborative process of consulting where the emphasis lies on establishing a working relationship between the client and consultant (Armenakis & Burdick, 1988, Czerniawska, 2007, Schein, 1995). In this hands-on approach, the consultants must have the ability to work with individuals, groups, and organizational dynamics. Consultation becomes more a matter of establishing a supportive relationship by focusing on and actively involving the client and their needs (Schein, 1995). More specifically, process consultation requires the ability to work in the present reality and engage in ongoing collaboration (Schein, 1987). Schein defined process consultation as “essentially being about building a relationship through a continuous effort of jointly deciphering what is going on in the ongoing interaction, relationship, and situation to make coauthored choices” (Schein, 1991a, p. 6).

Although process consultation is still used today by consultants (Cummings & Worley, 2005), Rockwood (1993) advised that consultants must consider different models and use them as necessary. Process consultation is just one intervention technique in the consultant's tool bag that they can use in their intervention efforts. Many researchers, including Schein himself have claimed that simple process consultation has become an outdated approach (Buono et al., 2011; Schein, 2004). There is a need for OD consultants to act as knowledge entrepreneurs and change

agents as they help facilitate learning and growth within the organization. As knowledge entrepreneurs, OD consultants need to provide clients with the knowledge they might not have. As facilitators and change agents, they need to provide critical input and feedback to their clients, while concurrently supporting the clients' ability to identify their developmental needs and enhance the ability to manage ongoing change (Block, 2011).

Today, the choice of intervention strategy relies on the needs of the client organization. Choosing an intervention is more than simply choosing a technique that the OD consultant feels most comfortable with or favors, rather it involves selecting an approach that addresses the specific needs and concerns of the client organization. The issue then becomes, are OD consultants knowledgeable enough on the right intervention strategies to choose from in order to best meet their client's needs? Some refer to this as technical ineptness (Cumming & Worley, 2009). *Technical ineptness* can be defined as an ethical dilemma that exists when consultants attempt to implement intervention strategies that they may not have expertise or sufficient knowledge and skills in to diagnose and solve the organization's problems (Cumming and Worley, 2009). This is where the partnering of OD researchers and OD practitioners becomes valuable as OD researchers can be instrumental in helping OD practitioners integrate the knowledge and expand their skill base so that they can be more apt to providing the best fit of solutions to their clients (Cummings & Worley, 2009; White and Wooten, 1983).

### **Role of Consultants**

In reviewing the literature, it was evident that there is no set definition of the role of consultants. Because of the great variation of the practices (Clark & Fincham, 2002), the consulting role has been difficult to define. In fact, it has been said that if you put ten OD consultants in the same room, you will get nine different responses of approaches used in their

consulting engagements with their clients. A study conducted by Masey (2003) helped demonstrate the difficulty in conceptualizing the role of OD consultants. To better understand the roles of OD consultants, three different consultants were asked to describe their roles using metaphors. Three different definitions were provided. One compared his role to that of a pilot of a ship undertaking a voyage while another compared himself to a gardener taking care of an ecosystem. The third described his role as a guide. Perhaps the reason behind such great variations of the practices may be in part because of the various backgrounds and values consultants have upon entering the field. These backgrounds and assumptions ultimately impact their practice. According to Burke (1994), the views of consultants are usually impacted by theories they value and their academic background and discipline (Burke, 1994). For example, someone with a psychology approach may take more of a client centered approach whereas someone with a background in industrial organization may focus on a more structural approach.

Regardless of their areas of expertise, values and background, it is important for consultants to demonstrate certain skills in order to effectively engage in OD practice. According to Block (2011), consultants must demonstrate technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills in their consulting engagement. Technical skills speak to the background and expertise of the consultant in the area in which they are providing support. Interpersonal skills include the ability to maintain effective relationships. These include the ability to communicate, listen, and provide support. Consulting requires the ability to effectively move through different phases within the consulting engagement, including diagnosis, problem solving, and evaluation. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on interpersonal and consulting skills.

Overall, consultation is essentially the act of helping (Bell & Nadler, 1979; Schein, 1987, 1999a). A consultant is the person who is deemed by the client to be capable of helping the

organization to enhance its effectiveness (Bell & Nadler, 1979). Therefore, consultants must have consulting and interpersonal skills needed to improve the effectiveness of an organization, its systems, processes, and practices. In terms of problem solving, client organizations who hire consultants typically expect the professionals who can help solve their problems because of their specialized knowledge. Engaging the client in ongoing collaboration requires having the ability not to only recognize the client's needs, but to consciously shift roles to best match and appropriately manage the client's needs during various phases of the engagement until appropriate interventions are implemented (Schein, 1987; 1999).

Several scholars have identified consulting strategies that are similar to Schein's process consultation model. In a model by Nees and Greiner (1985), consultants' role as "friendly co-pilots" (p. 16) align with Schein's process consultation (Buono, 2009). The consultant approaches the organization as a "co-pilot" (p. 16) on the journey of identifying and fixing the issues of the organization. In his masterful consulting strategy, Merron (2005) emphasized the goal of empowering clients to own the process and outcome of the collaborative effort. In this model, forming a partnership with the client is important as knowledge and capability are transferred from the consultant to the client (Merron, 2005).

A review of literature demonstrates the ambiguity of the role of consultants. Although some argue that they are change agents in transferring their skills to clients, what is apparent is that consultants' roles change and evolve throughout the process based on the clients' requirements. In the process consultation model, the consultant's role becomes one of "helping the clients become a sufficiently competent diagnostician" (Williams & Rattray, 2004, p. 184). Consistent with the learning theories discussed earlier, it is essential for the process consultant to help the clients see and learn about the problems for themselves in order to learn how to identify

solutions. Once clients understand and own the problem, they are more likely to also own the solution (Schein, 1987; Turner, 1982). Consistent with systems theory, the role of consultants is one that helps facilitate organizational learning (Senge, 2006) by enhancing the client's capacity for diagnosing solutions that are long term, effective, and sustainable.

### **Theoretical Models of Consulting Process**

OD consultants today must focus on developing structures, systems, processes, and people within organizations through a series of activities. As Quade and Brown (2002) explained, a "conscious consultant" (p. xxxvii) must be self aware of their own state, knowledge, and capabilities. However, more importantly, they must have a solid foundation and be able to help organizations survive within the complex and competitive reality of today's business environment. The new competitive reality is nothing short of interconnectivity, complexity, and non-linearity – all factors that impact the consultant and their practice. Given the severity and complexity of these issues, it is important for consultants to understand organization development and all the relevant theories discussed earlier.

A review of literature illustrated that the various consulting models appear to be on two ends of the spectrum. On one end, the focus lies on problem solving strategies. On the other end, there is an emphasis on relationship building. However, no matter what the problem may be, consulting is primarily dependant on the quality of the relationships between the client and consultant (Block, 2011; Burke, 2014; Schein, 1985). The focus in this study will be on the joint and collaborative process between the client and the consultant.

### **Process Consultation Model**

The process of consultation has been advocated by Schein since the late 60's (1969). The main emphasis in the Process Consultation Model is to help organizations help themselves. In

order for intervention efforts to be effective during change processes, it is important for the consultant to be fully involved in the process and engage the client. Having the ability to fully observe and reflect while collaborating and interacting helps build strong relationships that further engage clients. Schein emphasized the importance of focusing on the experience during the change process so that the capacity and ownership of the client is enhanced. Moreover, there is a need to focus on the present reality of the situation and ongoing interaction (Schein, 1987). Enhancing awareness and understanding help the consultant recognize the reality of the client's situation "moment to moment, shifting roles as necessary" (Schein, 1999, p. 70).

Schein's process consultation model offers a strategy for problem solving that can be applied to organizations. Figure 1 outlines the stages of problem-solving project that follows the Process Consultation Model. Schein identified the need for problem solving and organizational intervention as the core and starting point for all organizational processes. This need leads to the problem formulation phase that marks the beginning of the intervention cycle and process. Schein's Process Consultation Model consists of two major cycles, each consisting of three stages. Cycle 1, represented by the inner circle includes (1) problem formulation, (2) producing proposals for the solutions, and (3) forecasting consequences and testing proposals. Cycle II, represented by the outer circle includes (4) action planning, (5) taking action steps, and (6) evaluating outcomes (Schein, 1988).

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*Figure 1: An illustration of Schein's 1988 Process Consultation Model.*

The two cycles within the Process Consultation Model help address organizational problems, and can be viewed as two separate yet interconnected phases. The first phase consists of finding a solution while the second phase focuses on implementing the solution. The first cycle of intervention is usually broader and the purpose is to explore and observe the scope of the problem and generate alternative actions. A common mistake in this phase is the failure to accurately diagnose the problem and its cause. It is often easier to identify problems at the surface level with simplistic solutions. The consultant must be able to generate effective dialogues with the client to thoroughly examine and diagnose the problems within the complex nature of the organizational system (Heifetz, 2002; Schein, 1988). Schein (1988) advised dialogue over debates to compile "enough concrete incidents to be able to generate a sense of the problem from them, and then to seek the patterns that tie them together" (p. 293). Once the problem has been identified, a proposal can be formulated for the appropriate interventions.

Schein (1988) advised not to be too quick to offer a proposal without having thoroughly examined and diagnosed the totality of the system.

The final step in the first cycle is to forecast any consequences that may surface as a result of the actions. This stage may require piloting the solution at a smaller scale and evaluating the effectiveness of the conceptual intervention. Schein suggested applying appropriate criteria for forecasting the viability of a specific intervention. This may include running small focus groups or conducting formal research to gather the opinions of several individuals within the organizations to help construct a framework for validating a specific course of action.

During the second cycle, there is a transition toward the actual implementation. Here, concrete steps are planned and implemented. The outcomes are evaluated and activities are framed according to the results from cycle I. The step which allows transition from cycle I to II is crucial, yet very difficult. In cycle II, planning of activities around the implementation is needed. Here, there is a need for a clear communication plan as well as explicit assignment of responsibilities. Schein emphasized the importance of having the commitment and engagement of those in the implementation stage early on, beginning with the first cycle. Otherwise, those responsible for implementing the intervention may have a different conceptual understanding of what the organization is trying to achieve.

Organizational interventions may go through the cycle more than once, and thus there may be a need to jump between the cycles as necessary. It is important for the group to be cognizant of the cyclical pattern of this cycle because at any point, there may be a need to revert back to another stage. According to Schein, jumps usually take place between steps 3 and 4 and from 6 back to 1. The role of the consultant in the process consultation model is then to train the

client to effectively diagnose in order to solve problems. The consultant must engage the client to take the major responsibility to develop their own solutions and action plans. According to Schein (1988), problem solving becomes more effective when the client owns the problem and identifies the processes that need to be improved. The client's commitment for implementing the action plan is actually enhanced if they are involved in the entire cycle of problem solving that begins with the diagnosis.

### **Flawless Consultation Model**

Block's (2011) Flawless Consultation model is based on Schein's Process Consulting. According to Peter Block (2011), consultation is a process with the primary focus being the transfer of expertise from the consultant to the client. Block seems to have the right idea-the point of consulting should be for the client organization to be able to solve problems once the consultant leaves. More specifically, the goal of consulting is to (a) establish a collaborative relationship with the clients so that they can be engaged and enhance their capacity to most effectively solve problems; (b) give equal attention to the technical problems as well as the relationship with the client; and (c) enlist the commitment of the client during the consulting process. Block accounted for the possibility of the clients experiencing doubt which impacts their commitment. It is important for the consultant to confront these doubts at every stage.

Block categorized the process of consulting into five phases: (1) entry and contracting; (2) discovery and dialogue; (3) feedback and design for action; (4) decision making for implementation; and (5) evaluation. It is important for the consultant to use the best fit of consulting skills during each consulting phase to fully engage the client and establish appropriate and effective working relationships at each phase (Block, 2011).

The contract phase is key in Block's consultation model. This phase serves as the social contract between the consultant and client where expectations of both parties are addressed in an attempt to establish a good working relationship right from the start. Developing flawless contracts requires the ability to behave authentically and proceed in the present reality of each phase. Block defines authenticity as the ability to verbally express those difficult or pleasant emotions experienced by both parties. During the contracting phase, the consultant must acknowledge and address any concerns or emotions that the client experiences. This may include potential resistance that may surface as a result of losing or giving up control during the process. Block (1981) wrote that "resisting clients are defending against the fact that they are going to have to make a difficult choice, take an unpopular action, confront some reality that they have been emotionally been trying to avoid" (p. 148).

As stated above, resistance from the client may be one of the most difficult aspects of consulting (Block, 201). It is important to understand that this reaction results from apprehension, anxiety, and fear of change. The resistance is a predictable and natural emotional reaction to the process of facing challenges and/or change, and thus should also be acknowledged as an essential component of the learning process. According to Block, before change could occur, these emotions must be expressed and accepted.

The diagnosis phase allows the consultant and client to gain an understanding of the root problem. The consultant must engage the client in defining the problem rather than simply providing them with their opinion about the problems. An important technique in this phase is being able to distinguish between the implicit and explicit problem that is presented and the underlying problem. The sympathetic dialogue between the consultant and the client could help both parties better understand the implicit underlying problem that should to be addressed.

The diagnostic phase may reveal information about the organization that may go unacknowledged or unrecognized by the client, which may ultimately result in more resistance by the client. However, confronting resistance is just as important here as it is earlier in the process. According to Block (1981): “to have maximum leverage and get your expertise utilized, you need to deal directly with the resistance as it occurs. If you don’t deal with the resistance during your feedback meeting, you may never get another chance” (p. 228).

Block (2011) explained that it is important for the consultant to “funnel” (p. 42) the data before presenting the findings. This means that the data need to be reduced into a more manageable number of items. These final items are then selected for feedback with the clients to help shed light on the implicit problem. The final items that are shared with the client should be actionable, meaning they should be under the client’s control.

Block also explained that presenting the data requires having a balance between sensitivity and directness. The information collected during the diagnostic phase may reflect badly on the client or contradict their own beliefs about the situation. Thus, the consultant must be supportive of the anxiety or other emotional reactions experienced by the client as well as confronting the necessary areas needed for change. In addition to that balance, the feedback phase provides an opportunity for the client and consultant to develop a draft of their implementation plan.

The true commitment of the client and consultants become apparent during the implementation phase. During this phase, the consultant is finally able to do something “with enough impact to be noticeable to many people in the organization, and they have the expectation that change, or learning, will occur because of the event” (Block, 2011, p. 9). Here, it is important to encourage dialogue and structure conversation toward “personal responsibility,

questions of purpose and meaning, and what will be unique and new about the proposed change” (Block, 2011, p. 44). Strategically changing the conversation helps change the culture (Block, 2011). Moreover, it is important to align the actions with the diagnosis of the problem and the contract with the client. The implementation should relate to the needs of the client and the goal of the intervention.

During the evaluation phase, learning that comes as a result of the implementation is discussed and assessed (Block, 2011). Often, the real problem may not emerge until this phase after the implementation occurs. The possibility of terminating the relationship is possible, however, often times, there may be a need for a new contract to be discussed with the client.

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*Figure 2. An illustration of Block’s 2011 Flawless Consulting Model.*

### **Action Research Model**

The action-research model is based on Kurt Lewin’s practical theory that change becomes most effective when participants are involved and understand the system in order to change it (Lewin, 1951). Although pioneered by Lewin, action research has been used by many in organizational practices and development. It is a method used for improving practice which involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection based on preliminary research and evidence which guide the implementation and action phase. Action research relies on joint collaboration between the client and the consultant in identifying problems, ranking problems according to

priority, identifying methods for examining the root causes, and developing appropriate actions to most effectively and realistically solve the problem (French & Bell, 1990; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). Learning and reflection become an important aspect of action research, which ultimately help organizations develop and build a cyclical, long-range approach to enhancing their effectiveness in dealing with a multitude of issues.

According to French and Bell (1990), the goal of action research is not to only solve the problem, but also to generate new knowledge. They defined *action research* as:

The process of systematically collecting research data about an ongoing system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypothesis; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data. (p. 99)

Action research has been said to help achieve organizational transformations.

Furthermore, it has been described as an effective approach to change, and “a complex educational strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values, and structures of organizations so that they can better adapt to new technologies, markets and challenges, and the dizzying rate of change itself” (Bennis, 1969, p. 2).

Action research has also been described as a “planned inquiry” which is a “deliberate search for truth, information, or knowledge. It consists of both self-reflective inquiry, which is internal and subjective, and inquiry-oriented practice, which is external and data based” (Schmuck, 1997, p. 28).

As mentioned earlier, action learning is based on Lewin’s three phase change model. According to Lewin (1964), the first step involved in a change initiative is *unfreezing*, which describes the initial phase when the organization faces a challenge and recognizes a need for

change. Oftentimes, an outside facilitator is needed to help unfreeze the group dynamics and help the organization identify the core issues. During this first phase, the consultant slowly gets a feel of the organizational structure and dynamics, identifies the key decision makers, and builds trust. During this phase, the consultant gets a sense of what the problems within the organization may be. The consultant and client jointly begin the process of exploring with one another the possibilities of a working relationship. These conversations also help the consultant get a better sense of the client's readiness for change, the extent of resources available, their motivation, and potential barriers to change. Shortly after the entry, during the contracting phase, the consultant and client work together to identify the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved within the process. A formal contract helps define the process.

The next step in the unfreezing phase of action research is the diagnosis phase where data is collected to find the problems and opportunities within the organization. The consultant may not be able to accurately diagnose without engaging with the clients within the organization. By asking the right questions and gathering the appropriate information, the consultant can analyze the findings to determine the underlying causes of the organization.

Feedback also falls in the unfreezing phase. After diagnoses, the findings based on the analysis of the data must be communicated with the client. In this phase, it is important to share the findings with everyone who contributed information. The feedback should begin with the executive team, then cascade down through the organization to all stakeholders. The feedback phase is important as it allows employees to better learn about how the different parts of the organization connect and impact one another. Moreover, they can become involved in selecting appropriate interventions.

The second phase of Lewin's change model is the *change* or *transition* phase, at which point new ways of doing things are identified and tested to help address the uncertainty evidenced during the unfreezing phase. During the unfreezing phase, learning activities are identified to help the organization better align their practices with their objectives. New behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs slowly become embedded via these learning activities. The planning phase includes consideration and focus of the intervention to leverage the best results on the organization. This step is highly collaborative between the consultant and the client. Once the actual intervention and activities have been identified, the actual intervention is implemented. It is important that the consultant be flexible enough to modify the process based on the client's needs and potential changes or issues that may surface.

During the final stage, *refreezing*, the new behaviors become internalized or institutionalized. Communication and reflection between the stakeholders and the change agent are key throughout these phases. Evaluation becomes essential to help verify success and identify future needs for continuing practices to continue improving the OD process. As action research is a cyclical process, the aim is to implement activities that become ongoing and engrained into the practice of the organization.

Consistent with the other two process models, consultants must be flexible while maintaining the integrity of the process. The consultant must know how and be willing to change their strategy when needed based on their client's needs. Action research is cyclical and may require moving back and repeating previous steps as new information is introduced or resistance is experienced.

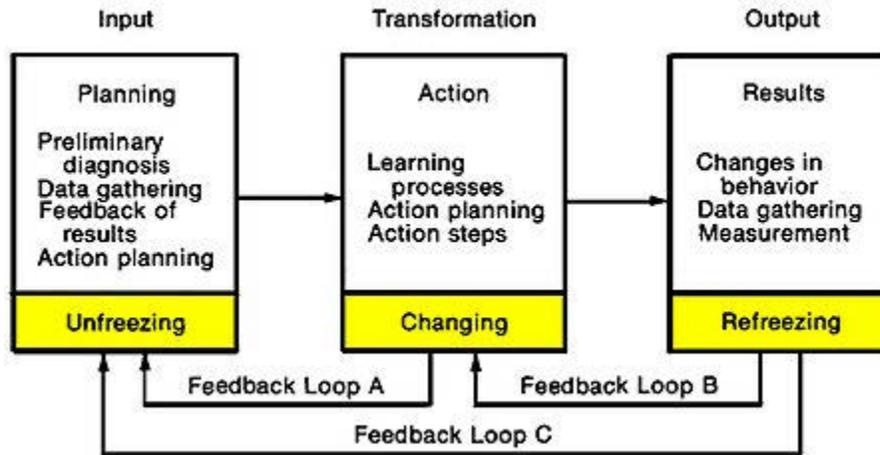


Figure 3. An illustration of Lewin's Action Research Model

### Empirical Research on Consulting

As the field and practice of OD has and it continues to grow, practitioners are using more and more cutting edge strategies. However, the information, knowledge, and practices do not seem to be transparent. Very few studies have been conducted on OD practice during the past decade. In the past, OD scholars and practitioners have written extensively regarding the underlying theories of OD (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Buono, 2009; Burke, 1982, 1994; Schein, 2006; Vaill, 1989). Although recent literature has been written on more recent theories of OD (e.g., systems theory, change theory, learning organizations), there is a gap in the literature regarding empirical data on approaches to OD consulting and how strategies are adapted to meet the demands of today's competitive market place. An extensive study conducted in 2010 (Worley, Rothwell, & Sullivan) concluded that there has not been any new research-based studies conducted since 2002. Worley, Rothwell, and Sullivan (2010) stressed the need for further research, especially given the context of the enormous range of challenges faced by organizations today. To that end, they suggested that "change management challenges are at the top of most CEO's 'to do' lists, OD should be in a position to help" (p. 133). Schein attributed

this lack of literature to the discipline not being fully developed (2008). He further stated that the discipline is in need of a structure that distinguishes and classifies its variations (Schein, 2008).

Sorge and Van Wittleloostujin (2004) asserted that because good consultants do not experience difficulty being chosen for their “ascribed professional judgment”, they have “no incentive to make this judgment explicit, let alone public, for anyone could acquire and use if they did, which is not in their interest” (p. 1222). Interestingly, they claimed that sharing the general knowledge would be harmful to the consultants as the “value added of what they offer” (p. 1222) will decrease in the eyes of the client as they are no longer impressed by the “seemingly objective diagrams, tables, and figures” (Sorge & Van Wittleloostujin, 2004, p. 1222). Moreover, they attributed the lack of knowledge sharing through empirical research to competition. If their methods of integrating knowledge or “putting two and two together” (Sorge & Van Wittleloostujin, 2004, p. 1222) were made explicit to the public, then competition would be intensified and there could be challenges to gaining clients for consulting engagements.

Despite the claim made by Worley et al., (2010), I did find a study conducted in 2006 which assessed the role and efficiency of OD consultants from the consultants’ perspectives. This study only further supports the ambiguity of consulting as a profession (Kakabadse, Louchart, & Kakabadse). A series of interviews were conducted with 17 consultants from a variety of fields. The questions were focused on the nature related to consultants’ relationships with clients and clarity of their roles. The study demonstrated that there are various opinions and viewpoints regarding the diverse and complex roles of OD consultants. However, the major theme from the interviews was that consultants added value to the clients and helped them move forward. Moreover, consultants are often faced with balancing their own needs with the needs of the clients. This requires the clients to be able to act ethically and proceed based on their clients’

current state of need. Results of the study also yielded the importance of transfer of learning and skills as a core element of the role of business consultants as they facilitate organizational learning within their clients.

Moving beyond the field as a whole to competencies related to consulting, the literature is very scarce relating to the actual practice of consulting. For example, a case study conducted in 2013 (Cooper, Nieberding, & Wanke) aimed to describe a consultation process with a senior leadership team undergoing change. Schein's process consultation model was used to guide the consulting process. One major finding of the study was the importance of the contracting phase, which emphasized clearly identifying the needs of the organization and establishing objectives for the consulting engagement. The second finding was to build rapport and a supportive relationship with the top leadership team of the company to help overcome resistance to change. Third, it is important to build rapport and get the buy-in from all stakeholders to help move through the various levels of the organization. Building long lasting relationships with key individuals helps the consultant practice as a trusted advisor. Fourth, the consultant's willingness to change the consulting focus as priorities and needs of the clients changed was a critical element to the success of the process. Finally, critical to the success of the organizational consultation was the "deliberate inclusion of reflective practices" throughout each phase of the consultation (p. 172). This includes guiding the client through conversations to help them reflect on the processes specific to the diagnosis, implementation, evaluation, and etc. Although these lessons were listed and described, they did not convey a deep understanding of the actual and specific strategies used by the consultants during their work with their clients.

The scarcity of empirical research makes it difficult to provide validity, reliability, and legitimacy of the consulting practices. Although practitioners and theorists like Schein, Block,

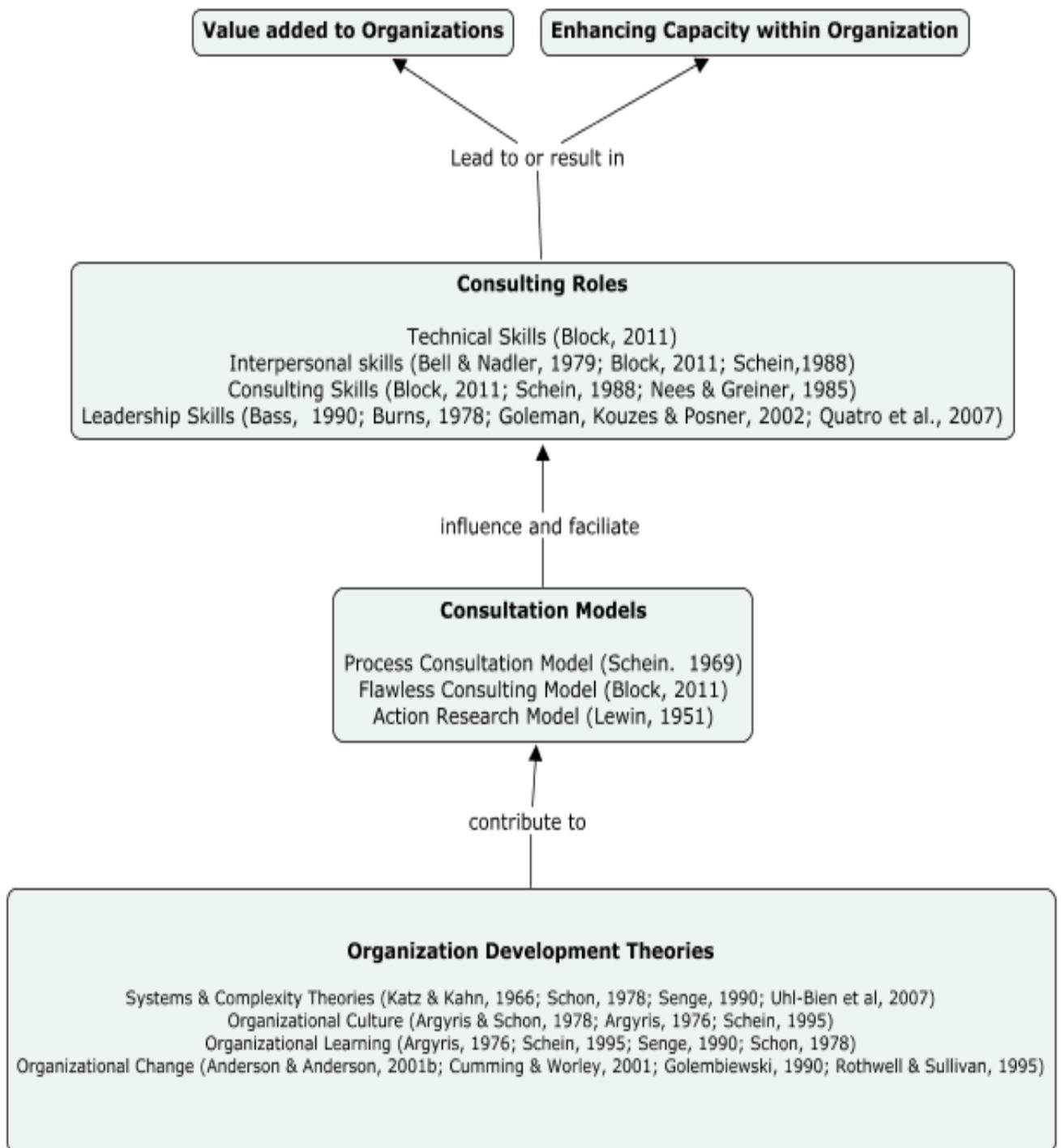
Bueno, Clark and Fincham have written extensively on the process of consulting based on real-world consultancy practices, there is a lack of systematic empirical monitoring of the strategies and their impact on various clients throughout the process and during engagement with the client. A method of two-way information sharing could add value to the profession if consultants (who practice day to day) would partner with scholars so that data could be collected, analyzed, interpreted and contributed to a more evidenced based practice (Sorge & Van Wittleloostujin, 2013).

There is a need for more fine-grained understanding of most effective process consulting strategies used to help build capacity in organizations needed to overcome the complex and competitive reality of today's environment. More specifically, what approaches do expert OD consultants use that contribute to the growth of their clients and promote organizational success? What strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process to identify and address clients' (organization's) need? How do OD consultants' approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?

### **Conceptual Framework**

As I seek to gain a deeper understanding of the process that expert consultants use with their clients to add value to organizations and contribute to the organization's growth, I plan to use key theories and concepts to guide my study. Figure 4 depicts key concepts and variables in my study. The model below demonstrates the need to build upon foundational theories of organizational development (OD) that explain and guide the practice of consulting. OD is impacted by assessing, understanding, and focusing on aspects of organizational culture, learning, and change that directly influence the consultant's practice. Three different process consultation models are used to demonstrate different theoretical approaches that guide

consultants to building a collaborative relationship with their clients throughout the process of consulting. Understanding of consulting roles, including technical, interpersonal, consulting, and leadership skills will help understand and explain the various approaches to consulting based on the needs of the clients. Figure 4 illustrates the connections of the various theories and schools of thoughts that underpin and give direction to this study.



*Figure 4.* A conceptual framework of the organization development and consulting theories contributing to effective consulting engagements.

### **Chapter III: Research Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the approaches expert consultants use throughout their engagement with clients. To understand more about the process used by this distinct group of leaders, a phenomenological qualitative inquiry was used to conduct my study. Using naturalistic inquiry, qualitative data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews with practicing expert consultants. Through phenomenological in-depth interviews, I sought to understand, from expert consultants' perspectives, what they perceived to be the most influential strategies they use to add value to their clients and contribute to the growth of their organization.

In this chapter, I will discuss and describe my research design and methodology, my role as a researcher, methods of data collections, methods of data analysis, strategies for promoting credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, delimitations and limitations of the study.

#### **Research Question**

The study is designed to answer the following research question:

How do expert OD consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success?

Stemming from the primary research question are three ancillary questions:

- 1) What key strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process of identifying and addressing clients' (organization's) needs?
- 2) What is the overall consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention?
- 3) How do OD consultants' approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?

## Research Design

Qualitative research will allow meaning to be captured from the experiences and perspectives of the participants as practicing consultants. Qualitative research will facilitate collection and analysis of data in order to better understand how the participants make sense of their process. Maxwell (2005) observed that “in a qualitative study, you are interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behavior” (p. 22). Moreover, qualitative research allows the researcher to use inductive analysis with a focus on “specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). This study capitalized on the strengths of qualitative research to gain a better understanding of consultants’ perceptions of the strategies and mechanisms they use in their practice, and how they contribute these to client success. Using a qualitative methodology as a process of phenomenology helped obtain data that were rich and in-depth and based on the descriptions of the participants.

The goal of phenomenological research is to collect and provide in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants in order to derive universal meanings. Phenomenology is referred to as “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Moreover, the phenomenological approach capitalizes on the researcher engaging in dialogue with the participant as the participant reflects on and describes his/her experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Proceeding from a phenomenological stance facilitates the researcher’s ability to capture and describe the common experiences of all the participants rather than individual experiences (Creswell, 2007). Collecting data from multiple people who experience the same phenomenon

helps provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' shared lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, "in accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essence of experiences" (Moustakas, 1995, p. 84). Therefore, the primary data collection method for this study was in-depth interviews within a semi-structured format and use of open-ended questions to illicit information about the participants' perspectives.

Patton (2002) recommended the use of qualitative interviewing when the perspectives of the participants are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. The use of in-depth interviewing allowed me to seek an understanding of the first-hand, insider knowledge that practicing consultants may have and potentially contribute to the education field. The use of interviewing as a key data collection strategy in the present study may allow for a better understanding of the experiences and realities of the participants by allowing their voices to be heard (Patton, 2002).

### **Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research, the researcher is perceived to be an actual tool in the research process (Eisner, 1998). The researcher acts as an integral piece within the overall research. In the processes of data collection and analysis, qualitative researchers highlight the complexities of the phenomena and the meanings their participants place on the phenomena based on their perspectives (Patton, 2002). As the qualitative researcher, it was my goal to understand how consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success. Understanding how my participants viewed their own work and using detailed

descriptions of their experiences was essential to allow the readers to experience the world as lived through the eyes of organizational development consultants (Eisner, 1998; Patton, 2002).

My interest for this particular area of study could be linked to my own professional experiences. Over the past few years, I have encountered and worked with a few organizational development consultants. I have also become familiar with a variety of organizations who seek the support of external consultants. I believe based on my experiences, I have developed a level of connoisseurship regarding organizational development and the inherent challenges related to the consulting profession which was beneficial to the research process (Eisner, 1998).

My familiarity with consulting allowed for a smoother flow of conversation as consultants shared their experiences with fewer inhibitions and with ease. In essence, being familiar with their world made me an insider. Furthermore, understanding some of their nuances, I was in a position to be more intuitively in sync with their terminologies and consulting language.

It was also imperative for me as the researcher to demonstrate credibility and build trust in order to establish and maintain positive relationships with the participants. I acknowledged all the participants as individuals with immense knowledge and experiences that could be of benefit to consultants, those aspiring to be consultants, or clients of consultants. I was conscious of my body language and reactions when listening to participants' articulate their perceptions of the techniques they found most influential during engagement with their clients.

Patton (2002) advised that establishing rapport and neutrality with participants is an important skill for the researcher. Sincerity and compassion about my desire to contribute to the field and learn how to best help clients was essential. This helped build trust and rapport with participants. Trust is an essential component for building connections and developing a

wholesome working relationship with my participants. Building that trust and establishing rapport helped promote dialogue that was collaborative, which in turn helped me delve deeper into the minds of my participants and gather in-depth data. I was cognizant of my attempt to create a working and trusting relationship with the participants which helped me obtain access to their insider perspectives which contributed to the extant literature base of this topic.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

The knowledge and understanding sought in this study was based on the collection and analysis of descriptive interview data and use of field notes. Interviewing was an effective and efficient technique that allowed me flexibility as I tried to access a plethora of descriptive data directly from the words of the participants in a short amount of time (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002).

#### **Field Notes**

Field notes are recommended as an observational protocol to help capture descriptive and reflective aspects of the site and all participants involved, including the researcher's thoughts and feelings. Descriptive notes help explain factual information about what occurs throughout the study, whereas reflective notes help account for the reactions and feelings the researcher experiences and their interpretations about those observances, perceptions, and judgments (Creswell, 2007). Adhering to Berg's (2009) recommendation, I took field notes during the interviews and completed the entry immediately following each interview. Berg further described the process as:

Field notes initially consist of mental notes, collected while interacting in the research setting. These are then transformed into jotted notes, or brief reminder notes actually written down and used later to jog the researcher's memory when he or she writes more complete field notes. (p. 219)

During each interview, I took notes consisting of key words or phrases that stood out or would serve as a memory trigger for later analysis. Some of these words or phrases included: identifying client needs, challenges to the profession, key skills, learned skills, and etc. I then transformed these notes into longer more meaningful descriptions immediately after the interview.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The specific research strategy for this study was in-depth interviewing using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to gather information on the process of consulting from consultants themselves. The interview is a carefully planned questioning and listening experience designed to obtain knowledge and perspectives of participants (Kvale, 1996). It also serves as the simplest, yet effective way to obtain information from people (Patton, 2002). Interviews elicit descriptions and details of participant' lived experiences, and any ambiguity is viewed positively as inconsistencies and contradictions reflect the awareness and context of participants (Kvale, 1996). Given that time is not a luxury for consultants, interviewing was deemed the best approach as it allowed me to access a plethora of data in a relatively short amount of time (Patton, 2002).

Specifically, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were employed to access meaning underlying the lived experiences of the selected organizational development consultants (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). Implementing a semi-structured interview involved using predetermined questions directly related to the study's research question to help develop a data set that facilitate and enhance understanding of the consulting process from the perspectives of consultants themselves. Pre-determined questions within a semi-structured interview provide the order in

which questions are asked while allowing probing. Open-ended questions also allow for further probing and a greater possibility for seeking depth regarding a phenomenon that may be complex and multidimensional (Berg & Lune, 2012; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). The carefully constructed research questions for this study encompassed the aforementioned characteristics in order to seek detailed descriptions that could only be answered qualitatively (See Appendix B).

### **Development of the Interview Protocol**

According to Peshkin, “there is no prototype qualitative researchers must follow, no mold we must fit in, to ensure that we are bound for the right track” (1993, p. 28). My purpose for this study was to learn about the participants’ career development and practices, specific techniques and approaches to consulting including the implementation strategies they use at various stages of consulting. The information gathered from the interviews helped me uncover and describe the central themes and patterns related to the stories of consultants and their practice.

My experience in the field of organization development consulting introduced the possibility for bias in constructing the interview protocol. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit thoughtful and natural participant responses reduce readers’ perception of bias (Kvale, 1996). My role as a qualitative researcher and professional experience with consulting and counseling was instrumental in constructing the interview guide.

Additionally, an extensive review of literature further supported the construction of the interview guide. Specific questions for the interview were designed to access participants’ knowledge, experience, values, and perceptions. Building upon interview guidelines of Spradley (1979) and Patton (2002), grand tour questions were designed to set the stage of the interview from the beginning. Questions one, two, and ten were designed to allow the participants to take the researcher on a grand tour as they reflect and describe their overall experiences related to their

consulting practice. The open-guided question of the interview guide were constructed in such a fashion to reduce the possibility of bias from leading or loaded questioning (Patton, 2002).

The interview questions were aligned with the research questions of the study. To reiterate, the primary research question is: How do expert OD consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success? The three ancillary research questions are as follow:

- 1) What key strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process of identifying and addressing clients' (organization's) needs?
- 2) What is the overall consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention?
- 3) How do OD consultants' approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?

There were four themes reflected in research questions: (1) consultants' identification of their clients' needs; (2) consultants' strategies used during their practice; (3) the change and evolution of the consulting strategies to address clients' needs; and (4) the value consultants add to organizations. Interview questions were designed to fit within each of these themes. Question six addresses the first theme; questions four, seven, and eight address the second theme, questions five and six address the third theme; and questions three and nine address the fourth theme.

### **Piloting the Interview**

In an attempt to pilot the effectiveness of the question guide, I conducted a preliminary interview with the president of a local organization, American Society of Training and Development (ASTD). As the president of the association, he has had several years of experience

in the consulting profession. Although he met the criteria to participate in my study, due to his assistance in recruiting, I did not include him in the formal research study.

During the review of the interview questions with the president of ASTD, he confirmed that appropriate business acuments were used in the language of the questions which would help in building rapport with other consultants. Moreover, he indicated that the questions were designed in a way to capture the unique perspectives of consltants as they may vary from one to another. He advised some changes to my initial wording of question number nine, and recommended a follow up question regarding assessing effectiveness on an ongoing basis.

### **Study Participants**

According to Moustakas (1994), it is essential for research participants to have “experienced the phenomenon,” the “willing to participate in a lengthy interview and perhaps a follow-up interview” and “grant the investigator the right to tape-record and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications” (p. 107). The sample of participants for the study originally consisted of 12-15 consultants who met the following criteria:

- At least 5 years of experience in leading a successful consulting practice
- Primary focus on organization development
- Practice is based out of Jacksonville, Florida

The reason for obtaining participants who meet these criterion was to remain consistent with the theoretical framework and design of the study.

To obtain a sample of 12-15 participants, I used my local networks to identify consultants. Existing local networks were inherited through my prior affiliations with ASTD and Department of Continuing Education at the University of North Florida. Because of their involvement with supporting the learning and development needs of a multitude of businesses

within Jacksonville, these organizations contract with many consultants and were able to identify prominent and highly recognized consultants within the area. I met with the director of Continuing Education and the president of ASTD to obtain a set of nominations for the study.

Upon generating a list of participants from the representatives of the two local networks, I emailed the potential participants with the following: information regarding nature and purpose of the study, statement of confidentiality, and the time commitment of the study which entails the time allotted for the interviews, transcriptions, and the member-checking process.

Upon final selection of 12-15 participants for the study, I sent the selected consultants an email included attachments such as proof of the IRB approval, the informed consent document, and a list of potential dates for the face-to-face interviews. I scheduled interviews with the first seven consultants who responded first. Interviews were arranged with times, dates, and locations most convenient to the participants. Once the interviews were scheduled, I sent out reminder emails two days prior to the interview as a reminder and confirmation of the appointment. After the initial seven interviews, I achieved data saturation, thus did not schedule any further interviews. I knew I was reaching data saturation because similar themes kept on emerging from one interview to the next. In between interviews, I made note of common themes which then lead me to seek contradictions in the following interviews.

Interviews were conducted April 22 through May 12, 2014. Among the sample interviewed, there were three men and four females. All participants were white and were within an estimate age range of 45 to 65 with their experience in consulting well over five to seven years.

I audio recorded all interviews using two digital tape recorders and transcribed the recordings thereafter. Interviews lasted between 90 minutes to three hours. I transcribed the data

within 24 hours of the interview. The language of the participants was captured and transcribed verbatim. Text files were uploaded on a secure, on a password-protected flash drive. All audio recordings were deleted after the transcriptions and after I listened to the recordings again. I then coded the transcripts using pseudonyms. I also took supplemental field notes throughout the interview process and during my reflections.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

I read the interview transcripts several times in order to gain familiarity and intimacy with the data (Eisner, 1998). In an attempt to maintain continuity of thought and gain a sense of whole, I read the transcripts as a total group, and also read them individually several times each in one sitting. Reading the transcriptions in one sitting and then again in smaller chunks of time allowed me to look at the individual pieces and also get a better understanding of the bigger picture. I read over the transcripts on multiple occasions and highlighted important quotations. Using *a priori coding*, I coded the quotes according to my margin notes keeping in mind the primary question and theoretical framework of the study.

Following Glsser's (1967) constant-comparative method, I constantly compared the concepts and categories as they emerged through interviews and my field notes. I used open coding and axial coding to reduce the data into themes and patterns that helped better identify the perceptions of the lived experiences relating to consulting, and served as a starting point for analysis (Eisner, 1998). Coding the data helped condense and classify them into more meaningful patterns. The coding process is one that is inductive and begins with the researcher "immersing themselves in the documents in order to identify the dimensions or themes that seem meaningful to the producers of each message" (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 358). An analysis of the data is achieved by repeatedly reading and re-reading the transcriptions and developing

categories, domains, and themes that are further refined throughout the process. During this process, I was cognizant of being transparent by unpacking my subjectivity and its potential influence on my understanding and analysis of data. I made it a practice to reflect in my journal regularly to help unpack any reactions or feelings that emerged.

In order to conduct a more in-depth analysis, I used *open* and *in vivo coding* (Creswell, 2005). At this stage of analysis, information was deconstructed section by section, and then emerging concepts were grouped into conceptual categories. I looked for patterns and connections within and between categories and themes in the data in an attempt to build a preliminary and descriptive framework for a later analysis. *In vivo* codes refer specifically to coding of the words or phrases used by the participants that provide validity for those patterns and themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002).

Transitioning from inductive to deductive analysis, *axial coding* allowed me to identify relationships between groups of codes that emerged in open coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Twenty-one codes were formed. Linking these patterns with the research question and the theoretical frameworks also helped me in further synthesizing the data to categories that are more specific and focused. Open and axial coding will be used throughout the data analysis phase as I expanded and refined codes based on themes that emerge from the data. Through careful reading and analysis, I identified eight themes, which were common across all cases emerged which allowed me to begin describing the themes and patterns.

### **Credibility**

The credibility techniques used in this study included (a) member checking, (b) cross participant and cross data triangulation, (c) thick-rich descriptions, (d) negative case analysis, and (e) journaling. As a part of the member check process, I shared my findings with one of the

participants and elicited their feedback on the legitimacy of my findings. This provided the opportunity for the participants to critically review the findings to see whether an accurate representation was conveyed during the interview (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Findings were triangulated across participants by looking for commonalities and experiences among them. The data were also triangulated as I compared the participants' responses with the detailed field notes captured throughout the interviews as well as the review of literature. Through thick-rich descriptions, I triangulated the findings to describe the common phrases used by consultants in my study. Describing the findings with sufficient detail and context enhance credibility of the interpretations and promotes transferability of the findings.

Negative case analysis was used to seek out and consider data that contradicted the primary patterns or explanations that emerged during data analysis. The use of journaling helped me create transparency in the research process as I reflected on. Before going into each interview, I reviewed my prior interview and attempted to make sense of the participant responses. As I noticed themes throughout my conversations with consultants, I made sure to seek contradictions to the patterns in upcoming interviews. In addition to broadening and confirming the patterns that emerge from data analysis, reporting these counter arguments enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings (Creswell, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Efforts were made to protect the rights of all participants and ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the entire study. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, the purpose of the study, the intended use of the data, and any foreseeable risks. To ensure anonymity, I assigned a randomly selected name to each of my participants and then referred to

them using that unique name throughout the study. Assigning pseudonyms was a method to help protect the privacy of their name and/or company names. Participants were informed that they could at any time decline to answer questions with which they were uncomfortable, and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were also informed that their responses will be kept confidential and that they will only be referenced in the study via pseudonyms assigned to help protect their identity and business affiliation. These methods collectively served to ensure the ethical considerations of all participants.

Specific to gaining trust and building rapport with my participants, I believe that my experience and connoisseurship with organization development and consulting was very valuable. My background and experience working with consultants allowed me to understand some of the nuances specific to the discipline which made for a smoother flow of conversation. Although this intimate familiarity served as a benefit to my study, I recognized the possibility of bias that could arise due to my prior assumptions. Thus, in an attempt to mitigate any subjectivity and view aspects of the phenomenon with a fresh set of eyes, I maintained a journal throughout the data collection and analysis phases to account for this possible limitation (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this research was to gain insight and develop an understanding regarding the complexities of process consulting from the perspectives of expert consultants. The perspectives shared by the consultants interviewed in this study helped enhance the understanding of the complexities of consulting and the processes used with clients to identify and solve problems within their organizations. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was deemed as the most appropriate means to achieving the goals of this study. Semi-structured

interviews and use of field notes helped capture participants' perspectives and experiences (Kvale, 1996). The following credibility techniques were used: (a) member checking, (b) cross participant and cross data triangulation, (c) thick-rich descriptions, (d) negative case analysis, and (e) journaling. Several coding techniques will be used to analyze the findings.

Chapter IV contains a more detailed description of the processes involved in data analysis and also includes a presentation of the results of the analysis for discussion through the emergent themes.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the process that expert organization development consultants use throughout their engagements with their clients. The primary research question is: How do expert OD consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success? The ancillary questions include:

- 1) What key strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process of identifying and addressing clients' (organization's) needs?
- 2) What is the overall consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention?
- 3) How do OD consultants' approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?

In order to understand more about the process used by this distinct group of leaders, I used a phenomenological qualitative inquiry to conduct my study. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews with practicing expert consultants. More specifically, I sought to understand, from the perspectives of expert consultants, what they perceived to be the most influential strategies used to add value to their clients and to contribute to the growth of their organizations.

My professional knowledge and experience in the field were beneficial in constructing the open-ended interview questions. However, I afforded my participants the freedom to express their own perspectives without any influence. My previous knowledge and experience with consulting were used as assets in the research process. Not only did my knowledge contribute to

the construction of the interview guide, but it was also valuable throughout the interview sessions in eliciting deeper, richer descriptions of consultants' experiences.

### **Description of Participants**

The study included seven consultants. To obtain the sample of participants, I met with the president of American Society for Training in Development in Jacksonville as well as the Director of the Department of Continuing Education at the University of North Florida. Due to their involvement with supporting the learning and development needs of multitude of businesses within Jacksonville, these organizations were able to identify prominent and highly recognized consultants within the area. The criterion used to identify the panel of consultants included the following:

- At least 5 years of experience in leading a successful practice
- Primary focus on organization development
- Practiced is based in Jacksonville, Florida

Twelve consultants were identified. All participants were contacted to determine whether they were interested to participate in the study. Interviews were scheduled with the first seven participants who shared initial interest in participating in the study. Because data saturation was achieved after the initial seven interviews, no further attempts were made to re-engage with the remainder of participants who had not yet responded.

Efforts were made to protect the rights of participants and ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the entire study. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, the purpose of the study, and the intended use of the data. They all read and signed consent forms, and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To ensure anonymity, I assigned a random letter to each of the participants. For the

purpose of better flow in the write-up of the findings, I created a pseudo name for each of the participants using their assigned letters as the beginning of the name. Assigning pseudonyms helped protect the privacy of their name and/or their company names. As a result, the following are the pseudo names that were used throughout the findings to refer to the participants: Brody, Cara, David, Gavin, Heather, Izzy, and Michelle.

Among the sample interviewed, there were three men and four females. All participants were white and were within an estimated age range of 45 to 65 with their experience in consulting well over five to seven years. Most of the participants reported having a background in human resources. One had a business degree before starting her career as a consultant, and another had a degree in education and career development.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit thoughtful and natural participant responses reduce readers' perception of bias (Kvale, 1996). My role as a qualitative researcher and professional experience with consulting and counseling was instrumental in constructing the interview guide. Additionally, an extensive review of literature only further supported for the construction of the interview guide. Specific questions for the interview were designed to access participants' knowledge, experience, values, and perceptions.

In an attempt to pilot the effectiveness of the question guide, I conducted a preliminary interview with the president of a local organization, American Society of Training and Development (ASTD). During the review of the interview questions with the president of ASTD, he confirmed that appropriate business acuments were used in the language of the questions which would help in building rapport with other consultants. His recommendations were taken into consideration of developing the final interview protocol. Overall, he indicated that the

questions were designed in a way to capture the unique perspectives of consultants as they may vary from one to another.

Building upon interview guidelines of Spradley (1979) and Patton (2002), grand tour questions were designed to set the stage of the interview from the beginning. Questions one, two, and ten were designed to allow the participants to take the researcher on a grand tour as they reflect and describe their overall experiences related to their consulting practice. The open-guided question of the interview guide were constructed in such a fashion to reduce the possibility of bias from leading or loaded questioning (Patton, 2002).

There were four themes that existed within the research questions: (1) consultants' identification of their clients' needs; (2) consultants' strategies used during their practice; (3) the change and evolution of the consulting strategies to address clients' needs; and (4) the value consultants add to organizations. Interview questions were designed to fit within each of these themes. Question six addresses the first theme; questions four, seven, and eight address the second theme, questions five and six address the third theme; and questions three and nine address the fourth theme.

### **Credibility**

The credibility techniques used in this study included (a) member checking, (b) cross participant and cross data triangulation, (c) thick-rich descriptions, (d) negative case analysis, and (e) journaling. As a part of the member check process, I shared my findings with one of the participants and elicited their feedback. Her comments helped enhance the legitimacy of my findings.

Findings were triangulated across participants by looking for commonalities and experiences among them. The data was also be triangulated as I compared the participants'

responses with the detailed field notes captured throughout the interviews. Through thick-rich descriptions, I triangulated the findings to describe the common phrases used by consultants in my study. Describing the findings with sufficient detail and context enhances credibility of the interpretations and promotes transferability of the findings.

Negative case analysis was used to seek out and consider data that contradicted the primary patterns or explanations that emerged during data analysis. The use of journaling helped me create transparency in the research process as I reflected on. Before going into each interview, I reviewed my prior interview and attempted to make sense of the participant responses. As I noticed themes throughout my conversations with consultants, I made sure to seek contradictions to the patterns in upcoming interviews. In addition to broadening and confirming the patterns that emerge from data analysis, reporting these counter arguments enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings (Creswell, 2005).

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

There were several delimitations and limitations within this study. They are listed below:

- 1) The study captured the perspectives of the participants at a single point in time (both chronologically—[during my interviews]—and in terms of the individual consultants' professional trajectories). To account for this limitation, I asked my participants for a variety of specific examples as they articulated their perspectives. These examples were provided from throughout their consulting careers.
- 2) The study only focused on the perspectives of OD consultants (thus, it excludes management consulting, IT consulting, financial consulting, and internal consultants). However given the purpose of my study, OD consultants seemed to be perfectly aligned to answer my research questions.

- 3) The study aimed at the perspectives of the consultants themselves and did not take into account any observations or conversations with those who work with consultants. Delimiting the study to consultants' perspectives had limitations with regards to a holistic view of the phenomenon. Given the competitive nature of the consulting industry, there was no guarantee that the participants openly shared their experiences and respond to the interview questions as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Knowledge and insight were simply gained from what the participants said they do; no formal observations of these engagements actually occurred. I did however take measures to build rapport in an attempt to develop a wholesome relationship with my participants so they felt comfortable and fully engaged in the dialogue.
- 4) The study focused only on consultants in the Jacksonville Florida location. This also introduced limitations with regards to transferability and generalizability to other settings. However, it is important to consider the population, size, and rapid industrial growth of the city as a fair sample for the study.
- 5) The sample of participants being predominantly middle aged white consultants may have been a limitation. I did not deliberately look at ethnicity for my study.
- 6) Finally, some may argue that a sample size of seven is not significant enough to generalize findings. For the purpose of my study, I focused on the quality of consultants rather than quantity, and thus sought to find consultants identified as most successful in the Jacksonville business world.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

In-depth interviews were conducted April 22 through May 12, 2014. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 3 hours. Upon completion of data collection, I transcribed all the audio

recorded interviews. I listened to every audio recording within 24 hours of the interview and wrote in a journal thoughts that may have transpired from listening to the recordings. During the journaling, I wrote down potential topics for analysis which served as a starting point for my data analysis. The relationships and patterns that I noted through my journaling became more apparent within the transcripts. After the interviews were all transcribed, I read the entire data set together in one sitting. The reading of the transcription as a total, then reading the individual transcripts several times each provided the foundation for data analysis through in-depth familiarity with the data.

During phase one of the analysis, open coding, I read through all the data, line by line and my journal, and I categorized the information based on themes that began to emerge. During the next phase, I organized the data into categories and looked for relationships between the categories. I came up with a total of 21 categories and seven sub themes. I then created an excel document listing each of the identified categories with the responses which fit that category. I noticed that many of the responses overlapped and fit multiple categories. I then carefully re-read through the data and was able to collapse the themes into seven primary and one secondary theme. These apparent findings that emerged from the interviews with these consultants will be shared throughout this chapter.

This chapter presents an in-depth exploration of the six primary and one secondary theme that emerged from the data. The primary themes are those directly aligned with the research questions. The secondary theme was a finding that emerged that does not directly answer the research questions, however add value to the study. The primary themes include: (a) organization development, (b) key competencies for consultants, (c) client needs, (d) client-consultant engagement, (e) assessing effectiveness, and (f) valuable advice to others pursuing consulting as

a profession. A secondary theme that emerged was: consulting profession. The table below shows all the themes and sub-themes:

Table 1

*Primary and Secondary Themes*

	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
<b>Primary</b>	Organization Development	Planned Intervention Human Resources Organizational Change Building Capacity
	Key Competencies for Consultants	Interpersonal Skills Communicating Effectively Listening and Questioning Skills Key Consulting Skills and Characteristics
	Client needs	Identifying Client Needs Identifying Client needs Strategic Inquiry to Identify Needs Addressing Client needs Resistance to Change
	Client-consultant engagement	Building relationships Partnership
	Assessing Effectiveness	
	Valuable Advice to Others Pursuing Consulting as a Profession	Experience Matters Staying Current
	<b>Secondary</b>	Consulting Profession

In this chapter, I describe each of these themes in more detail. Excerpts from the interviews are used to bring the voice of the consultants into the descriptions. Together, the themes contributed to fostering insight and understanding of the complexities within organization development and the consulting profession.

## **Organization Development**

As shown by the literature review, there is no consensus on how organization development (OD) is described or defined. A 2002 study demonstrated 27 different definitions of OD. Given the lack of clarity and consensus on OD, I asked my participants to define OD in their own words. Common themes that emerged when defining OD included: (a) planned intervention (planned strategy to help organizations move forward), (b) human resources (focus on the human relations aspect of the organization), (c) organizational change (change management as the organization moves from one state to another), and (d) building capacity (building capacity within the clients in the organizations so that they can think and act strategically to deal with their organizational dynamics and issues).

### **Planned Intervention**

Consultants serve as the primary instrument as they help organizations strategically plan for their future. Participants in this study commonly stated that their approaches were strategically planned efforts to help organizations think and act strategically. Izzy explained “it’s a deliberately planned organization wide-effort ... or it could be a deliberately planned departmental wide-effort.” These planned approaches aim to increase the efficiency and productivity of the organization and its people in it. It’s important not to mistake planned for pre-conceived – the consultant and the leaders within the organization collaborate as they identify the issues within the organization and plan the appropriate intervention. Before planning the best approach for the client organization, it’s essential for the consultant to do a thorough analysis for a better understanding of this organization, their vision, their processes, their limitations, and their direction. David explained this notion by saying:

The process of doing that really requires that you focus both on the organization and the people who provide leadership for that organization. In looking at an organization, I had built my own mental model around organizations which says that you have to first have priority around where you're going and so therefore part of OD for me is to work in helping the company establish its vision, its mission, its strategic plan, its core direction, its core values, its dashboards, its measuring systems. But that vision is to focus on the marketplace so part of the vision is also helping companies understand and clarify the market place, their target customers, and a particular characteristic of those customers so they can align their vision to it.

In exploring the techniques consultants use to help them identify their clients' needs and better analyze the organization, all of the consultants explained the importance of examining the organization as a whole as well as looking at its smaller parts. Gavin described the process:

Typically we get a call from someone when they're in trouble and they know something is dysfunctional and not working right and they're too close to it so they want an outside perspective. So we go in and figure out what the steps are, and what we have to do first, but we need to do an analysis of what the issues are. When you're talking about OD, you have to find that there are dysfunctions, something is not going right, productivity isn't good, personality clashes, lot of conflict, and then we have to understand what is happening and why it's happening.

Consultants are called into organizations to help them integrate the right strategy and structure to enhance their organizational effectiveness. Training and development, and coaching were all terms used by the participants as they described their planned OD strategies to help their organizations identify and achieve their goals. These trainings may include (a) "leadership

training” to help the individuals in the organization to enhance their leadership skills to more effectively manage aspects of the organization, (b) “coaching” to help the senior leaders in the organization identify their vision and mission, become strategic to better align with their vision, and to most effectively manage change; and (c) training related to a specific development topic need within the organization to enhance the capacity of the individuals within the organization.

### **Human Resources**

Most of the participants reported having a background in human resources. One had a business degree before starting her early days in a consulting firm, and another had a degree in education and career development. Despite their academic backgrounds, most of the participants have worked in the human resources area.

The focus on the human side of businesses was a theme that emerged. This was also referred to as human resources. Consultants are often called on to help organizations solve their problems, and/or make necessary changes in their systems and processes in order to become more efficient and effective. A key emphasis in OD is working with the top leaders to better manage their employees to most effectively lead or cope with the changes within the organization. The focus on “human capital” or “talent” appeared to be paramount in OD. From the perspective of the consultants interviewed for this study, employees are viewed as assets to the organization, and their effectiveness is enhanced by further learning and development, otherwise referred to as “human resource development.” Increasing the effectiveness of the people within the organization helps build capacity which in turn adds value to the overall organization. Michelle noted that “the work of the organization is to increase the effectiveness of the people that work there, not so much the technology or the production.” She further explained:

Organizations are starting to figure it out. If the people are happy, the customer gets taken care of...it used to be backwards. They thought let's take care of the customer and our business will be successful. Now, they get that if their employees are happy, they're going to make the customer happy. If the customers are happy, they're going to buy stuff. If they buy our stuff, we'll make money. That's an important chain of events...if any organization is looking to be successful and strong over time.

Gavin touched on the interpersonal dynamics within the people in the organization. He explained that:

In every organization there are dysfunctions. It could be dysfunctional relationships.

There are certain people that think they know more than the others and bully their way through...then there are just relationships that won't work.

Heather added that OD involves understanding the behaviors of all the individuals within the organization at "different levels throughout the whole company and how that impacts the culture of the organization." She added that OD is helping the "organization be successful in terms of its people and then in turn will help it become successful in terms of its own business."

David further emphasized the importance of helping build talent among the employees. He shared his perspective that OD includes "identifying the talent you need through recruitment, selection, ongoing development, career development, performance management systems, etc."

Cara added that as OD practitioners, consultants "take a look at the people impact of any contemplated change."

Consultants typically partner with organizations to help them either initiate a change or help them survive a change in order to make some part of the organization more efficient. During

time of change, consultants consider various aspects that may impact the organization, including the human resources aspect. Cara explained:

You want to take a look at it... what is about to change, how does it impact the jobs...the change could even be wanting to get rid of 8000 jobs. That's a change. Then how do you do it? You take a look at all the HR processes and all the business processes and go in between looking at everything taking place and the people in skill sets and talents and quantities and cost of the people side of all that, what's going to change, how do we make that change?

### **Organizational Change**

Change is the new norm for organizations, and the demand for change leaders who can lead positive, effective, and sustainable change initiatives continues to rise advantage (Argris, 2006; Grint, 2005; Senge, 2006; Tapscott, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). OD consultants are often those leaders who are called upon to lead change initiatives that can be positive, effective, and sustainable. All of the consultants discussed the interconnection of change with OD. David explained how change relates to OD:

Selecting and implementing significant change is one of the most challenging undertaking that faces an organization. If the change involves the entire organization and it also requires new paradigms that will replace established ways of doing business, the challenge is daunting. Managing the process of change is essential to successful implementation.

Cara in particular talked about often labeling herself as a change consultant rather than OD. "OD consulting is a sub-set of what I do...I think of what I do as change management." She further elaborated by saying that she never presents herself as OD, and rather as a change

consultant because of the stigma associated with HR or OD, so instead she uses the term that is viewed as more favorably by the organization. She explained:

I try to never use the word OD because organizations don't care about that word. In the world of corporations OD or HR are second class citizens because they are too academic. I don't use those words ever because OD immediately puts the tag of HR which immediately puts irrelevant, second class citizen... I never present myself as OD. I usually present myself as change. However I really hesitate to use labels because in the way the world is right now, there are so many labels ... things mean so many different things to so many different people – not just how they've been trained but then how their company adapts it and their last company adapts it...and the personal interpretation of it all. Using terms is really odd so I usually will throw out a lot of terms. Change management or managing change is one....change is actually what I use. Well what are you trying to do? We are trying to get from here to there. Well to get from here to there we have to look at processes and people and technology and coordinating what all needs to happen...then I may educate them. I call that change management. I tell them what I call it so they can come back to me and say we call that ...this... then I start using what they start to call it immediately. I come at it a little bit sideways.

All of the consultants also recognized that change impacts the overall organizational system, even if it occurs in one small pocket of the organization. One consultant explained this notion:

The organization at the bigger system is changing. All of that changes simultaneously and it has to be managed and coordinated and to me the management coordination of all that is change management. Then all that takes place and you have a new changed

organization. The organization that was operating in this way is now operating in a new way because of the smaller change.

David said that “organizational change is systematic.” He explained that there are various factors that need to be identified and leveraged in order to guide change. He explained that consultant “can help the organization align itself so that it’s perfectly designed to deliver the power and its vision to its customers, and that really can be broken down to four major elements.” He described the four elements:

One of them which is *organizational structure* or the design of the organization, another one is the *organizational work process*, system, methodology. The third is the *people*, which goes all the way from identifying the talent you need through recruitment, selection, ongoing development, career development, performance management systems. The fourth is *tools* –whether those tools are facilities, software systems, policies and procedures, or other resources needed to deliver it. When I talk about organizational development, I really talk about helping an organization look at and understand what it is attempting to accomplish, for whom, and how to build the organization in its totality with all those elements so that it’s perfectly aligned to deliver to those maximum results.

Another common finding among the participants was that successful change initiatives must be driven from the top of the organizations which is why many of them begin their engagement with the C-suite. David explained:

Organizational change is not a grass roots initiative and if the senior leadership of an organization make it clear through their behaviors that they really do not stand for what it is they mean, then they’re not ready to engage because the organization does not believe in them.

## **Building Capacity**

The ultimate goal of OD is to build capacity within the organization so that they can deal with similar issues in the future. Partnership is key in helping build that capacity. David noted that “my goal in OD is to help organizations become more effective and more productive in doing what they do. The process of doing that really requires you focus both on the organization and the people who provide leadership for that organization.”

A common finding was that from the beginning, consultants are helping their clients build capacity. By asking them probing questions, consultants are helping their clients examine their processes and systems more closely. Moreover, they are learning to communicate better by acknowledging and articulating what their challenges may be. Izzy explained:

As you build that scoping conversation during the diagnostic phase, you are teaching your client. I have been a consultant for 20 years and know way more about the systems than the people in them. When I’m in there, I teach them that they’re a part of a bigger organization and that there are parts to it and so we need to look at the whole practice, company...what is the best starting point. I have to start slow with them, but while I’m doing that, I am educating them throughout the process with them to see how all things fit together, and doing that education they often can get a bigger picture.

Often times, consultants work with the same organizations year after year on a variety of organizational issues. Participants explained that their scope of work often broadens as they continue their engagements with their clients. Consultants may start their work with their clients by focusing on small pockets of the organization at first, then expanding their involvement with

time. Brody discussed how he helps individuals within the organization build capacity through his 1x1 coaching:

It's benefiting their whole team and organization to be able to grown more. The person becomes more effective and their managers too... their managers have said to me that they've learned a lot through the process and send other employees to me to work with.

Overall, consultants of this study described organization development as a planned intervention, often involving change, with a focus on processes as well as relationships within employees with the aim of enhancing capacity within the organization.

### **Key Competencies for Consultants**

Upon evaluating the responses, it was evident that consultants emphasized the importance of having interpersonal skills, communicating effectively, skillful questioning and listening in addition to other consulting skills and characteristics as essential to being an effective consultant. Participants found these skills and strategies critical throughout the process of consulting engagements as relationships are developed and clients' needs are addressed.

#### **Interpersonal Skills**

In order to build relationships, add value and enhance capacity within the organization, consultants indicated that they practice interpersonal skills to develop trust, and their communication skills to build capacity. Interpersonal skills, according to them include establishing rapport, being a trusted advisor, practicing emotional intelligence, and being sensitive and understanding the needs of clients.

All of the consultants emphasized the need to establish a strong rapport and foster trust with all of their clients in order to build a sustainable and valuable partnership. Participants

defined trust as professional standards ranging from keeping promises, delivering results, and being reliable. Consistent with the others, Michelle noted that it is vital to establish trust very early in the client-consultant engagement. She compared herself (and other external consultants) to those who work within organizations, emphasizing the criticality of need for consultants to establish trust even more so than when working inside an organization. She noted that “professional standards in relationships are way higher for consultants than they would be if it were boss-employee relationships, or a boss-peer relationship even.” She elaborated by saying “I think as consultants, as opposed to internal employees, we have to have a solid level of professionalism because employees can ask forgiveness...consultants cannot!!”

Professionalism contributes to establishing trust. When discussing professionalism, all of the participants stressed the importance of reliability and delivering results. Michelle noted:

One of the things I try to do is live up to my commitments and do what I say I’m going to do. I think that’s really the essence of it. When I promise a deadline, I deliver. When I have a set of quality expectation, it is what it is.

She further explained that delivering results helps enhance the client-consultant relationship. “I think it is very appealing when I can promise that and then deliver on it. I think it strengthens the relationship because I believe that we’re in the business of giving pleasure or alleviating pain.” Cara further elaborated on the consultant-client relationship by saying:

As a consultant, your relationship with that client is critical. The relationship means with the person. You need to get them to trust you and to believe that you will be honest and upfront, and remember they know you got their back...everything you say, you do!

Another consultant, Gavin compared the relationship to that of a mechanic:

If we don't deliver results, then the trust goes away. If you buy a car that is a lemon...and if you keep taking it back, they can't fix it, after a while you don't trust the mechanics, you don't trust the dealer, you don't trust anybody....you will end up finding a different way. You have to deliver results and if you don't deliver results, trust goes away.

David characterized consultants as trusted advisors. A trusted advisor has several elements.

Gavin described this by saying:

One is you better be competent, you better know what the hell you're doing! And how you're doing it, and not blow smoke or provide academic solutions. The second is you need to operate with complete authenticity and be yourself and not attempt to be something you are not. That means delivering with integrity, that means delivering as promised, that means saying what you mean ... that means being honest with a client whether they want to hear it or not. Bringing truth to power as it were, as required.

### **Communicating Effectively**

What Gavin described above as "saying what you mean" falls within the realms of communication. Communication is the ability to skillfully explain information in a clear and honest way. As Brody explained, "it's not enough to know the information – you've got to be someone who can explain to people what they feel."

In order to relay the information in a clear manner, consultants first have to understand their clients so that they can speak in their language. When asked about necessary techniques to help consultants better understand their clients, they all identified listening as key. Speaking the language of clients requires listening and patience. Heather said, "you have to be able to listen

and really hear what they're saying instead of always doing the talking...you need to make sure you listen to them."

Having the ability to have difficult and honest conversations with clients was another common thread among the consultants. Michelle explained that consultants "have to be willing to tell them (clients) the truth, based on what you think is the truth – be honest and be open." David described this as a technique "and that's a skill...but what it really is courage." Gavin said that this is "not something terribly rocket science or anything like that"... "I tell them what I'm seeing as the problem" and "I don't sugarcoat things." David explained:

What it really is is being able to look at a client and say you may disagree or may not want to hear what I'm saying to the point that when we're done, you are going to want me to go away and never come back and that is ok. It's not what my intention is, or my desired outcome but I would rather speak the truth to you even if at the risk of you not wanting me to be here anymore than to do you what I think you want to hear just to be able to continue to do the work.

He explained further by saying:

I believe that we've got to tell things the way they are. The difficult conversations...they're difficult but they have to be done. Most people shy away from those difficult conversations or they will try to weasel words around it. Now you got to go in and confront the situation right away. If you don't, then they don't get the message. You got to deliver the real message. You have to have standards.

Whereas Gavin and David described this concept as more matter-of-factly, Michelle described it more strategically:

There is a concept I learned at a conference once that never left me. A man talked about realistic optimism. Realistic optimism is saying this is the way it is...this is the cold hard reality of the situation. However, I see us getting through this successfully. I see a good outcome on the other side. When I face conflict like that, I try to approach it from a realistic perspective not only internally but I try to communicate that and have that vision of how we are going to work together and how we'll be successful working together, what the outcomes are going to be... that can be life changing for the individual and so that typically works.

Given the understanding of human behavior, it is important to anticipate resistance, defensiveness, and difficulty of clients always openly and positively responding to these difficult conversations. Therefore, it is important for the consultant to understand their clients, practice emotional intelligence, and handle situations accordingly. Cara put this into perspective by explaining:

At the core it's all people and I guess if there is another thing is that I'm really good relating to people. You can be an asshole, you can be in my face, you can be passive and not giving me anything... and I'm very good at that. I'm very flexible and that kind of training has really helped me... just to understand people. Emotional intelligence in a professional environment. The way you respond may be using different language but it's recognizing .... When you're with a leader, a lot of time what they are talking about has nothing to do with the work, it has to do with people and personalities.

Specific to understanding people and dynamics, Gavin explained:

The interesting thing about people and dynamics and interactions with individuals is that two are not ever the same. I did study human behavior and there is a lot of similarities but nothing exactly the same. The need of the clients are not the same so my approach changes because there just isn't such a cookie cutter approach and I do believe that you have to customize your approach based on what you are hearing from your clients...and you have to be smart enough to know what you did in the past with someone else with a similar issue may not work here because the business, the people there...we need to be on our feet.

The importance of fully recognizing the differences between clients and varying approaches accordingly was another common finding. Gavin explained "if individuals get defensive or upset about what they're doing, you can't get defensive back. You've got to maintain that sense of calm, that sense of control...and show that you are confident in what you are doing." Heather expanded by saying "you have to approach people with a positive mind-set, be upbeat...even when you're having a lousy day."

### **Listening and Questioning Skills**

Listening and questioning were identified as two key skills needed to help in the analysis phase as consultants really "dig down." Interviewing, conducting surveys, and careful observations were specific techniques identified by all of the consultants. These techniques help consultants determine whether the issue is related to aspects that could impact "organizational culture" or "employee engagement." Gavin considered this as the "fun part – going in there and doing a bit of analysis." "You have to be able to ask questions strategically to get to the root of the problem." He further shared his technique by saying:

I talk to people. I'll do some surveys, but typically like to talk to people and find out what makes them tick, what is going on, what is good, what is bad, and then if we get some kind of common thread, we try to work through that as well

Skillful listening goes beyond hearing the verbal messages. It requires listening to not only the non-verbal cues, but also to what may be implied. Michelle said, "listening is not falling off a log...listening is a discipline!" Heather further elaborated "when I meet with someone, I try to focus my attention on them – not on other people around or on my phone. It all sounds simple and yet we know people who don't do this." Izzy described her approach to listening to non-verbal cues:

One of the things that some people are good at is looking at facial expressions and really understanding what they mean and I think I'm kind of really good at that and I just let myself feel what that is and so when I'm in a meeting with a big client and really want to help them, I get in that space.

When I asked them to explain how they learned to be effective in their listening and questioning, most of the consultants shared that they had innate abilities in these skills. Izzy explained using her senses:

As a consultant, you can get used to walking into a building... I can smell something now. I can feel it. Actually some things get me itchy that I can see immediately by just the looks on the faces of people. If you showed me like in certain hospitals, I walk in I can tell you what their surveys would tell you about their employee engagements. I think I'm just really an insightful person and I think you have to exercise that even if you aren't that way already. You have to have a lot of empathy and really allow yourself to feel

those feelings which a lot of people find uncomfortable. I'm ok with it...you really need to internalize it. You have to. It's using your emotional intelligence

Questioning is another critical skill described by consultants. Questioning goes hand-in-hand with listening. As described by the consultants, skillful questioning and listening help consultants better understand their clients so that they can speak in their language. Heather noted:

If you aren't good at asking questions, you're not going to be able to help understand the problem. Having a lot of knowledge and resource will help you ask different kinds of questions and not to see whether you need to get broader or more specific information regarding the company

Michelle explained "you have to really hear what your client is saying and you have to pick up on cues and ask very good questions to get to where you need to be." She explained by saying:

Questioning skills are not that hard to learn. What, when, why, where, how? You need to ask these to really get down to the bottom of something. You ask why five times and by the end of it, you will have a lot of information...not only am I as the consultant trying to learn, but by asking the questions, I'm getting the client to think and apply it. I'm helping them think and then they tell you what it is. It's much more like why do you think that" or what are you seeing to lead you to believe that? How do the others around feel this is working? It's like CSI or something...Investigating!

Consultants identified skillful listening and questioning crucial to helping better understand clients. A common thread was that these skills will help consultants communicate

more effectively with their clients as well as helping them articulate their problems in their own words. Heather explained that “sometimes they can’t do that so you really need to try to get them to do that.” Michelle described this by saying “you have to probe and dig and get to the core issues. You have to have patience because your client isn’t always prepared to go there... You have to help them if they have a hard time getting where you want them to go.” Because the need and readiness of clients vary from one another, consultants must have a true level of understanding so that they can probe their clients in the most effective way. Heather explained:

Sometimes I have to get them to see for themselves by asking the right questions and sometimes I need to be more explicit for them. Sometimes I have to say I’ve noticed that at times this is something you do, do you agree? And then it’s knowing that certain things can make people shut down....so there are times I have to be explicit, particularly if the person has that kind of personality where you have to be, and that’s important. You have to understand the personality of the people you are working with.

### **Other Consulting Skills and Characteristics**

When I asked my participants to identify key consulting skills and characteristics beyond interpersonal, communication, listening, and questioning skills that have proven to be the most effective during their consulting practice, they identified the following: (a) discipline, (b) confidence, (c) influencing skills, and (d) analytical skills.

As independent practitioners, consultants seem to have a lot of independence and flexibility. One common theme that emerged among the consultants was knowing how to balance that flexibility and independence with a level of discipline. Consultants need to be able to truly practice personal discipline day-in and day-out not to only most effectively manage their

own practice, but to be able to manage their clients' needs. David explained that time management and personal discipline "are two skills that you must have with incredible ferociousness." Moreover, "if you are not efficient, if you do not manage your time well and if you do not apply the personal discipline to getting things done, you cannot be very effective."

David shared this personal discipline around his consulting:

I structure the work very carefully. I can tell you that all of the work that I'm doing to do with my 10 clients between now and December 31<sup>st</sup> of this year are all designed and planned and scheduled on their calendars and mine. Now it will be changed as we go through the year, of course! But I can tell you right now if you said to me are you available on September 16<sup>th</sup>, I can look on my calendar and tell you right now exactly and whether or not I have that availability and how much availability I have. I had someone call me last week and wanted to do some work and I was able to look at my calendar and say I'm sorry...I have no capacity until February 2015.

Most of the clients also talked about not having a formal start or end to their days. Their schedules often depend on the level of work and delivery needed for their clients. One of the consultants (David) I met with in particular has a newsletter that is distributed electronically monthly. He discussed writing his newsletter as another example of personal discipline:

It's always there. There is nobody kicking me to do that, telling me to do that...I don't get paid for doing that, no client is asking for that, so the only way that is doing to happen is if I have the discipline. I don't always know what I'm going to write. I don't know what I'm going to write this month yet...I kick it around in my head but within the next

week or so, it'll be written and it'll be sent out to my webmaster and it'll be ready for distribution.

Discipline also includes not taking up unnecessary time from the client. Cara explained that when she works with high level executives within companies, it is imperative that she take into account their time constraints. This requires being able to recognize when it is important to push back and request additional time with the client than what they can spare. Izzy explained that her time with clients vary based on the situation and the need of the client. Using the below example, she demonstrated the concept:

Unless you know it's 30 minutes and they tell you all they have is 10.. and you say I can take up 10 minutes of your time but we are not going to get where we need to go. It's going to take 30 minutes for me to really get this in front of you and arm you for what I need you to do afterwards....I need 30 minutes. You need to be able to know when you need 30 minutes. Most of the time they'll tell you 10 and you'll need to work within in.

The participants shared the importance of confidence in their ability and knowledge as they help their clients. Sticking with the example used above, Izzy explained:

You need to understand – and have the confidence and acknowledgement of yourself as the expert to know when it's appropriate to stand up to that...to your client and switch their mind. That's really the mindset you are wearing...to have their back. Ten minutes isn't enough to get me to get you solid.

All of the participants emphasized the importance of confidence as a key characteristic to effective consulting. Often times this confidence comes as a result of experience in the field.

Consistent with others, Heather expressed that “it's hard for people who come right out of school

to go in and be a consultant if they don't have some kind of experience that they can show to build credibility. You need to be able to show that you have that." When asked about what confidence would look like in action, Heather shared her views by saying "when you meet someone – act confident (but not arrogant). Smile, put out your hand to shake the other person's hand." Whereas most of the participants' description of confidence seemed to be a belief in their own abilities, Izzy's perspective seemed to be bolder. She described the need to be "not just confident, but cocky." She explained by describing the interaction with clients:

You need to be very cocky. Cockiness is an expressed confidence. What I mean by that is that you have to be able to tell your client, unflinchingly I can do this....if you give the whole thing to me, I can do this for you. You have to make eye contact and get them to respond physically...make the eye contact. you want to see what the answer is and the smile is in their smile, no matter what they say...it's how they look back at you. You need to get that. that's when you know you have to trust. I just want them to know that if there is a problem, they can call me, and if it's something I can do and I know I can do, and if I have time, I can do it. and if I tell them I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it...and I always deliver!

Influencing skills was another key attribute identified by effective consultants as being important to help clients move from stage of recognition to another. As the expert, consultants have a deeper understanding of strategies that most effectively add value to organizations. As practitioners, consultants come in to organizations to help their clients understand their own problems. Individual within the organizations may not recognize the issues or agree with the viewpoint of the consultant, and as a result become resistant. Heather explained that "there have been times when someone has pushed back and as a consultant, you need to know when to step

back.” Michelle added that “sometimes when you’re proposing something and it’s not necessarily your client’s idea of the way it was supposed to happen, you have to help them see and that is where your influencing skills comes in.”

Izzy further noted:

If they don’t see it, you may need to step back and then think about or find another way to show it to them. A lot of times the first time we learn something about ourselves, we don’t like it and a lot of times we need the time to go back and let it sink in and reflect then decide. So they need some of that time then to come back and bring that back up the next time to meet with them.

As explained by the consultants, having high credibility is a precursor to having the ability to effectively influence others. Izzy explained this by saying that her clients “know I’ve fixed big problems in the past at other places and they know there were off the grid issues in the past that I was just sooooo good at and they know.” Almost all of the participants highly correlated trust and transparency with credibility. Keeping promises, delivering results, and being reliable help establish trust. Izzy even characterized this as “the really really really really biggest one <skill>.” She explained that “if you’re not trustworthy, they will never give you the work. They’ll never trust you with their problems...especially the sharp c-suite guys who are very clever about who to trust.”

Although the consultants I interviewed primarily focus on organization development, it was evident that the range of problems and clients they consult with vary. They emphasized the need to treat every client as unique and with an open mind. Although they employ a toolbox of strategies, their specific approach varies according to the distinct characteristics and problems of

their client organization. Therefore, it is important for the consultant to be analytical and know what strategies to use specific to their client to add the most value and enhance capacity within the organization. Heather explained:

You need to be able to analyze situations and problem solve and take a step back and think about things strategically but then also be able to break it down into steps or process to be effective, especially if you are a sole practitioner and don't have people who can help you do things. You have to be able to sort things and figure these things out.

David's account helps explained how his experience has helped him build his toolbox that helps him best support his clients:

For example, when I do leadership development, I sit on the computer with content manuals, PowerPoint for what would be about 150-200 hours of instruction. That's an awful lot of content. Having that and having built it over the course of 30 years and continuing to refine it, when I'm sitting with a client, and they talk about their needs, I know that I can pull from the treasure trove, that library and very efficiently carve and create for them what would ultimately be a highly customized work product but will take 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the time that it would take them to be able to produce because I've already built that.

Although consultants did not undervalue the importance of analytical skills, most of them indicated that possessing solid analytical skills is not sufficient. Having experience as well as the ability to listen and understand problems was more important to this study's OD consultants.

Overall, consultants identified interpersonal and communication skills critical to effective consulting. More specifically, skillful questioning and listening, consulting skills and characteristics were emphasized as key to built rapport, enhance the consulting engagement, and address clients' needs.

### **Client Needs**

Another theme that emerged was the criticality of effectively identifying and addressing client needs. By asking the right type of questions and probing statements, consultants help their clients understand their underlying needs. All participants acknowledged that understanding their clients' needs is the precursor to addressing their needs. The process of probing and helping clients recognize their areas of challenges becomes an ongoing part of the client-consultant process, and therefore consultants often change their approach based on the needs of their clients.

### **Identifying Client Needs**

Consultants in this study emphasized the importance of listening as a process of uncovering their clients' needs. The consultants must listen carefully so they can get to the underlying roots. One common finding was that consultants should not go into the engagement with a pre-conceived notion of what the problem may be. Rather, they assume that the problem is more than what they were hired for. Heather explained that "the consultant may be hired with the client thinking what the issue may be, but it's up to the consultant to help them identify the real problem below the surface."

David noted the importance of truly understanding the "culture, clients' goals, their needs, and the nature of the environment." In order to truly understand these aspects, consultants need to pick up on the clues that are verbalized as well as what they observe. Meeting with the

clients to build the trust will help the consultant become more familiarized with them. A few consultants discussed using formal assessments as a tool in their meetings with the C-suite in order to help identify such aspects. For example, Heather shared that she uses the Hogan assessment to examine “personality, motives, values, and then how they act under stress” as she tries to learn about her clients. Many of the consultants discussed asking for specific situational examples from their clients to help them better understand various aspects. Heather further explained:

I try to stay very aware of them. When I walk into their office, I pay attention to the cues that are around them. I pay attention to how they treat their administrative staff. I pay attention if they get an interruption how they handle it. What is on their desk and are they organized? What seems to be important to them? By paying attention to different cues, it helps to really understand beyond what is just shared during the interviews and meetings.

Beyond consultants not having a pre-conceived notion, through the interviews it became evident that clients don't always know what their problems may be, and therefore it is up to the consultant to help them uncover the concerns that may be much deeper than at first evident at the surface level. Cara noted:

I would say 25-30% of the time what they see what the problem is is actually the issue/problem. Of the rest of the time, I would say 60% of the time they are in the ball park of what it is but there is quite a perspective ... they hold a skewed perspective of it that once I help them skew that perspective, it really shines the light on how they were looking at it. Often it's really important to have that shift because it's not that what they're seeing is inaccurate or incomplete, it's just why they're stuck. It's my support to

help them look at things in possibly different ways so they're not stuck... and they can see how it may look different. 60% is that they're really right there, but they're seeing it wrong. The 40% is that they're really at the wrong problem.

Michelle elaborated "I go in and listen very carefully to what they want. Once I understand what they want, then it's time for me to kick in my expertise and say 'ok I think this is a way we can approach it.'" David described this with a basic example:

I had one client who said to me that he has a human resource problem. I said ok, talk to me about it. It was with the CEO and he had his top 2-3 people with him. He talked for a while and I listened and asked some probing questions. I then looked at him and said 'you don't have an HR problem. You have a problem with your business model. You may also have an HR problem but if you don't get your business model right, it's irrelevant. We talked about the problem and then together we designed the best solution for the company at that time.

A common phrase used by the consultants was "digging." Gavin described the process as "we dig and dig and we dig. We talk to the individuals about what it is and sometimes we need to have group discussions." The importance of trust came up again as Gavin further explained:

You need to develop trust number one and even if you come off with a disagreement on certain things. In other words, management thinks one thing and I'm thinking it's (the problem) something different. You still have to have that level of trust with individuals so that they will listen and understand. You won't have all the answers alone

Another important finding was the need for ongoing identification of clients' needs, beyond just at the beginning of the client-consultant engagement. Brody explained that he likes

to “have check in points as we go along to see how things are going. I typically call them (clients) and ask what they’re hearing and whether they have any feedback from people in the organization regarding the changes or if there is anything else I need to know.” David elaborated that issues can emerge during the implementation phase:

I uncover some of the underlying root causes of why I was brought in to do the work in which I uncover some cultural issues or I may uncover frustration with lack of clarity of strategic direction or I may uncover frustration with some internal conflict that is going on between different areas of the company. In that case, I will have feedback sessions with the C-suite and bring those truths to them at which point I will ask them if they want to engage to address some of those issues. Usually they will acknowledge that I’ve uncovered some things and we’ll talk about addressing those areas as well.

### **Strategic Inquiry to Identify Needs**

Strategic questioning and probing help consultants not only to understand their clients’ problems, but better yet, they help shape them. They ask questions to help lead their clients through a self-discovery process to uncover needs that they may not have recognized. Michelle explained that:

Questioning and talking to the client helps gather information and determine the issues. They come in and say what they need but if you ask a little deeper, a few pointed questions, you realize it may be another issue. You have to help them see that.

Strategic questions help consultants identify the challenges within the organization. These challenges were often referred to as the “pain” or “sore spots.” Gavin described the questions that should be used early on during the conversations with the client:

The first questions are about the business...about the pain they're having. Where is the pain? I'm not telling them what my solutions are, but kind of talk to them about them. What is your biggest issue? What is it that you want my consulting for? What brings me here? That is where we get into the discussion and ask some probing questions so we can see it at least from the top manager's perspective and that is one of the things that we could dig down and get a little deeper into what is happening and what is not working. I can't make assumptions that I know what the answer is.

Additionally, almost all of the consultants talked about the importance of not making assumptions, although most did say that they often sense what the problem is from early on. An analogy used by one of the consultants demonstrated the simplicity of identifying problems that to her seem very obvious:

People usually go to the doctor because of a symptom they are having. They describe the symptom as their calf hurting. What hurts? What is happening? My foot hurts...then you see they're wearing 5 inch heels. Did it occur to you that those 5 inch heels could be the problem? The problem sometimes to me is that obvious. I'm not kidding.

Regardless of sensing what the problem may be, all of the consultants discussed the importance of questioning the clients to help them uncover the problems for themselves. Using the same analogy, Izzy demonstrated the ambiguity of deeper rooted issues:

Sometimes it's harder than that. Chiropractor will tell you sometimes if your disc starts on the bottom, your leg will start down here, and the hernia will be somewhere else. You won't think it's your calf but your third disc may be starting to bulge and you don't know that until you take an MRI and then do all the massage and correction and then tell me

how your calf feels. It's better...well because it was never your calf. It's your bulging disc, so every time your calf starts hurting again, that means this is out of alignment and you need to care for it.

Michelle provided a more industry related example to demonstrate the type of questioning with her clients to help uncover deeper rooted issues. In this particular example, she was coaching an employee who lacked awareness of the need to change behavior. Using strategic questioning, Michelle demonstrated how she helped her client dig deeper to recognize the deeper issue.

I may ask 'how is your current style working for you?'

'Working fine...pretty good.'

'Well where do you think the organization is going'

'They're doing this, they're doing that'

'How do you feel or respond to those changes in the organization?'

'Pretty good'

'Well what do you think your competition is doing to respond to these same changes?'

Who are your competitors? What would happen if organizational restructuring happened and your manager was looking at your department? Who do you think would they consider as the most valuable employee?'

As demonstrated in the above example, expert consultants must be experts in their listening skills, but they are skilled at going beyond simply responding. Rather, by understanding

their clients, they predict the issue at hand in order to appropriately manage their approach. They need to listen to the hidden cues to pick up any points of fear or resistance. Michelle's description of the above engagement helps further demonstrate this point:

You need to understand what they're afraid of because there is something they're afraid of so you have to get down to their root of problem. You need to find the core fear and if you figure out what that is, you may have a shot. My client said "I'm just an old dog and it's hard for me to learn new tricks." So... "are you afraid that you don't have the capability to learn the technology skills or you're afraid that you don't have the skills to confront interpersonal issues that are going unchecked and causing problems in your area?" So you get to the real core issue and once you get there, then your resourcefulness comes in and you move them through. Once you start seeing them build momentum, you can start to coach them if they're taking that momentum. Here once the momentum is there you can ask "what small step can you make to move forward that you would feel comfortable doing?" You need to build off that momentum.

Izzy shared the questions she likes to use in her conversations with the C-suite, which are "what keeps you up at night? What is your big burning issue?" She elaborated that she asks them about how they've been dealing with these issues to date. During this analysis phase where the consultants slowly help their clients recognize their issues, they are also helping them prioritize. Izzy explained "I tell them if I were to take care of one of aspects of the issue for them, would it help them, and what would it be? Then as we talk about it, I partner with them, and we strategically tackle the issue."

Izzy further explained “as you are doing the diagnosis, you are actually helping somebody understand their own problems. You help people walk through it and understand it.” Izzy shared a specific diagnostic technique she uses as she seeks to understand the issues that her clients face.

SPIN – Situation, Problem, Implication, and Need. It’ll go like this: what is the problem? Then the implication, so if you don’t fix it, how much is it going to cost? Need – what is the immediate need? I ask them to tell me everything...what is going on?

All of the consultants referenced various examples and specific questions they use throughout their engagement to demonstrate their approach to questioning clients to identify and address their needs. Izzy stated it as simply as possible when she said “it’s like going to the doctor...what hurts?”

### **Addressing Client Needs**

There are many different approaches to solving clients’ problems. Consultants expressed that their planned approaches vary from client to client, and therefore it is important to know which strategy works best in what situation. Michelle explained this by saying:

Clearly you have to have a very sharp toolbox and part of that is having solutions that you can offer to solve their problems. I think it’s important to be open minded... you may walk in thinking about a solution but you have to be prepared to come off that and be prepared to take a total turnaround based on what you learn and hear out of the mouth of the client.

Addressing client needs result from really understanding the client organization, the people within, and their specific needs. Because of the varying needs of the clients, the solutions also differ based on the specific status and need of the particular client. David explained:

There is a big difference in being a consultant and doing what I would call staff augmentation. If you want to do staff augmentation and be the person who hangs around and helps with projects, don't call yourself a consultant. As a consultant, you have to start with the clients' needs. What is the client trying to accomplish? Very often, I'll start with a question that asks 'why am I here? What is it you're trying to accomplish?'

Having an extensive experience in consulting and in various organizations was another common characteristic among all the consultants. In fact, many contributed their vast experiences to their success in being able to effectively address client needs. David noted "I have a fairly substantial number of tools, methodologies, processes, content that I developed over the years that I bring to a wide variety of circumstances but there is no guarantee I'm always going to do the same thing in the same way." He elaborated:

For example, when I do leadership development, I am sitting on that computer looking at the content manuals, PowerPoint for what would be about 150-200 hours of instruction. That's an awful lot of content. That would be the equivalent of 20-30 days I can stand up in front of a group and conduct leadership development for 30 days and never be talking about the same thing twice. Having that and having built it over the course of 30 years, and continuing to refine it, when I'm sitting with a client, and they talk about their needs, I know that I can pull from that treasure trove, that library and very efficiently carve and create for them what would ultimately be a highly customized work product for them but

will take 1/10th of the time that it would take them to be able to produce that because I've already built that.

Another common finding that emerged, related to addressing client needs was the change in the consulting approach based on the particular need of the client. Although it is essential to have a variety of approaches in their toolbox, all of the consultants emphasized the importance of direct alignment between the need of the client and the approach of the consultant. Several consultants attributed the need for the specific consulting approach to the uniqueness of people, dynamics, and interactions among individuals – all of which vary from case to case. Gavin described:

I did study human behavior and there is a lot of similarities but nothing is exactly the same. The needs of the clients are not the same so my approach changes because there just isn't such thing as a cookie cutter approach and I do believe that you have to customize your approach based on what you are hearing from your clients ... and you have to be smart enough to know that what you did in the past with someone else with a similar issue may not work here because the business, the people there....we need to be on our feet. Each problem within different businesses need to be diagnosed a little differently because there are different.

Hence, getting to know the organization and the people within is key. Heather explained:

My approach changes because I get to know the other person better. As I work with them, I get to know a bit more about what works with them and what doesn't. You might start a certain way with the person but then recognize that they have changed, and so it's important to monitor that and even address it. I may bring attention to this and ask them

how they think they may have changed over the past few months. Even this conversation will help me know whether or not I need to change my approach.

Izzy noted that understanding the various personalities and dynamics helps dictate specific consulting approach to make for an effective engagement:

Part of it is understanding personality upfront. Do you have to be more directive with that person or more assertive because that is the only way they will listen. Do you recognize that they are the type that like to reach the answer themselves so you really need to guide them and walk them there and hope they understand and get there.

An effective consultant changes their approach throughout their engagement with their clients, especially because a variety of aspects may change in the organization. David's example helped demonstrate this need:

I met with one of my clients for breakfast on Thursday morning and we talked about a session that I'm doing with them next week. Based on our conversation, I knew I had to make some changes to better address their needs, and so I completely redesigned what it was that I was going to do next week. On Sunday I wrote them an email saying here's the redesign and started making the necessary changes and sent an email to all the folks that will be involved.

As I inquired about the change in approach, only one consultant discussed the need to even dress differently based on who your client is. Cara explained:

In smaller private businesses, I dress different. I might wear broken up pieces, more fluid, cardigan ... suite like in the colors but it's not a suite. If I'm first meeting in the corporate

world, I'm wearing a suit, skirt, a jacket, and the skirt and jacket are the same....

Remember the corporate consulting is the expensive consulting and the rule of thumb is always dress a level above your client in corporations. They're paying a boat-load, lots of money for us in the big corporations. Now it doesn't all go to me the consultant, it goes to the consulting firm that I'm with. They pay a lot of money so we have to look expensive. Now in the small private businesses, I have to look professional but during my intimates with them, I'm mostly trying to make them feel good...I'm not going to use big words and business acronyms, I'm not going to pull out my bio.

Cara was also the only consultant who spoke about her specific strategies in relation to the type of clients she works with. Her use of writing tools and assessment strategy varies between her corporate clients and her small business clients. She explained:

I try not to have anything structured on the table unless they demand it. I do have paper... I have pens. If I'm in the corporate world, I have a regular pen. If I'm in the private world (small businesses), I bring a colorful marker because in the private world they're intimidated as hell.

### **Resistance to Change**

Other times, clients may be not ready for change or the implementation, and therefore it is crucial for the consultant to recognize the barriers and change their approach accordingly to best meet the needs of their clients in their current state. During the change process, many deep cultural or political issues may be uncovered for the first time. When asked about their clients' reactions to uncovering some of these issues, words such as "denial," "challenges," "resistance," "confusion," "lack of clarity" were used to describe emotions of clients. David explained that

“resistance to change is a natural human phenomenon. All people resist change, some more than others. Managing that resistance is an essential part of the process.” Similar to the other participants, David has written extensively on the process of change including resistance to change. In one of this written pieces, he explained:

Change creates uncertainty. Organizations generally achieve fairly predictable results with their existing business model. Their outcomes may not be the desired results, but they are predictable. Change is unpredictable. The results may be far better – but they may also be far worse. And success often looks and feels like failure until the change is very nearly completed. Staying the course of implementing a change – which is essential for its success – meets with continuing human and organizational resistance and pressure to pull the plug before the process is completed.

Consultants in this study emphasized the importance of understanding reactions to change and effectively addressing their clients’ needs. Gavin explained that he will “need to change the approach so I can create success within the constraints in which may arise.” Additionally, he will “have a feedback session with the senior management and bring these truths to them at which point I will ask them if they want to engage to address some of these issues.”

Izzy explained that she treats resistance or challenges that may surface as “another educational moment. I am always educating.” Consultants also indicated that having strong relationships and partnership with their clients often helps in their strategy of managing their resistance. Cara shared that as the “external consultant ... my style is I’m sensitive to ego in that I don’t insult someone and I don’t point fingers...but I am blunt in terms of...if I see it looks like

this to me, that's what I say." There are times that consultants will have to be patient and take a different approach until their clients are ready to focus on the bigger problems more strategically.

Cara's example helped demonstrate this concept:

If approach A in my mind is by far the better way, but my client at the top level really wants another approach, it is my job to educate him on A and make my pitch to help him see it differently and hopefully he chooses approach A. But they might still choose B, and they often might. B may become the approach we take, even if I believe intellectually that A is the better option. Here's how it makes sense to me. The company gave my client the duty and obligation to get this thing done. They're going to get the thing done – A way or B way or C way. A way is best in my mind. I try to educate. B is the way they're going to ... so this change is going to happen. Here is where my belief comes in...you are better with me in that scenario than anybody else because I can see the pitfalls and the stuff that may come up and I can protect you and I can protect the company .. I will help you do B the best way possible because you're clearly going to do B. I'm still collaborating because I'm educating them with different options. In the end they choose the option based on their best understanding their company's needs. It's quite easy for me.... I've never had a choice of A or B where one is unethical in my mind. I've never had a moral dilemma. I've had dilemma of this one going to cost a whole lot more or much more painful for people...that's the A or B options typically.

Asking the right type of questions and probing strategically is for consultants as they effectively identify and address client needs. Consultants emphasized the importance of truly understanding their clients' needs beyond what they might share on the surface. The process of

probing helps clients describe their problems from a different lens which ultimately sets the stage for the consulting engagement and intervention.

### **Client-Consultant Engagement**

When asked about key influencers to effective client-consultant engagement, the need to build strong relationships was identified as the most crucial. Consultants described several aspects related to building effective relationships, including partnership and trust as top factors. Brody explained “the most ideal relationship is a situation where my clients trust me, feel comfortable with me, and I feel comfortable with them, where they have confidence in me.” David described his relationships as “honest relationship with clients where I am a trusted advisor. My client has to be willing, otherwise my words mean nothing unless all I want to do is fly in, tell them what to do, give a speech, and get the hell out.” Michelle described her most ideal relationship with her biggest client as “one of professional respect, equity, partnership. There is a quality in the intellectual exchange. They don’t tell me what to do, we jointly decide what to do.”

### **Building Relationships**

Building relationships with clients is key to an effective consulting engagement. In the example below, Brody explained how she builds rapport during the early stages of her engagement with her clients:

In the first meeting, I really want to just establish rapport so I have about a 6 page set of questions where I go through their background, their childhood, what influenced them in their childhood, size family, where they live...walk them through their career, then talk about current how they see their relationship with their manager, how they see their

relationship with coworkers, where do they see themselves going in their careers, so really that first session is very much helping them feel comfortable with me and gaining an inventory of their background.

Cara added:

As a consultant, your relationship with that client is critical. The relationship means with the person. You need to get them to trust you and to believe that you will be honest and upfront, and remember they know you got their back...everything you say, you do! It's we will get this done. I will do it for you also...I'm there for them.

Another commonality among the consultants related to relationship building is their tactics in building relationships beyond their scheduled interactions. The specific approach varied among the consultants. Whereas some may take their clients to lunch or dinner, others send personal notes. Some mentioned asking about their clients' personal hobbies and interests including family, while others send literature related to their clients' needs or interests. A few mentioned sending thank you cards, notes, or emails to their clients after their meetings. Heather noted "if I have an article or something that might be of interest to them, I send it to them."

David shared how he builds interpersonal relationships with his clients:

Just as you are sitting in this chair right now, I have any number of clients who come here and talk to me about whether it's their company, their work, their own career, their personal lives....and we build deep relationships. The average relationship I have with a client firm is 5-10 years ...some have gone as long as 20 years because of providing sustaining value through defined methodologies.

Brody shared his strategy: “if I know there is a topic that someone is interested in, I send them information or offer to make connections for them.” Furthermore, he thanks the support staff in the organization for doing things such as “booking conference rooms, assisting with logistics of project, etc” by taking a “present to them with a written thank you note.” He explained how these gestures often open the door for other consulting engagements. “ In one situation, I gave a thank you gift to one person and eight months later, she referred me to another company who hired me. I didn’t thank her to create a favorite with her, but I just think it’s important to recognize people in support roles. These kind of things make people feel good.”

Heather provided an example of a time where she changed her rate to work with an organization that was struggling financially. Her actions demonstrated her partnership and dedication to the company, which ultimately strengthened their consulting relationship:

This particular client had a bad couple of years financially and they were making a big investment in their leadership development. They were coming off a bad couple of years and they shared that they don’t think they can work with me and pay my rate. We went back and forth a few times but we worked it out in a way that I would help them, but also take care of me. It was a win-win situation for both of us. Then two years later when they started doing better financially, I asked to renegotiate my fees and they were willing to do so because upfront I was fair and worked through their struggles with them.

Whereas several consultants emphasized the importance of confidence in the consulting relationship, Heather noted that it is important to “share my mistakes and what I learned from them” in order to build relationships. She said “I talk about what worked or didn’t work in my

OD interventions with previous organizations. I think it's important to see we are all humans and to recognize that we all have areas of development.”

Having a positive reputation was another interesting finding among the participants, which they claimed contributed to effective consulting relationships. Heather explained “you have to protect your reputation. If you are associated with people who lack integrity, no one will hire you because they will know. If you screw up your reputation, and are known as not having integrity, you can't build future relationships and will never be able to do other things.”

All of the consultants highlighted that referrals are the main way in which they get business. Moreover, building relationships and having a positive reputation leads to continued engagement with an organization as well as referrals to being consulting for other organizations. Gavin stated “probably about 90% of the time, we are referred into the organization. When you have that referral, you usually have some instant credibility.” Heather explained that in addition to her expertise and knowledge, organizations hire consultants “because of our relationship.” She elaborated by saying that “it's those relationships that set me apart from other consultants with similar knowledge and expertise. It's the reputation that gets me hired over someone else, because there is a connection between us.” Gavin explained by saying “referrals get your foot in the door, but if the credibility is already there based on your reputation.”

### **Partnership**

In describing the need for building relationships to enhance the client-consultant engagements, a common term used by the consultants was partnership. In order to fully understand the dynamics and complexities of the organization, there is a need for collaboration

and partnership between consultants and their clients. Cara explained how partnership starts early on in the relationship:

That joint relationship is starting from the very beginning. It starts with the referral actually because someone they trust said to trust this person. The relationship has already begun because they're open to the possibility that I could actually help them before they even meet.

Partnership comes in many forms starting with having an engaged client who contributes to the conversation. Brody explained "they need to have some idea of what they're looking for. An effective engagement is where they have at least an idea of what they would like to see change, have the budget to do so, and are willing to be available throughout the process." Heather added "it's collaboratively coming together with a solution. If I have an idea and they have an idea, how do we work together to get there?"

Participants also emphasized the importance of having an open mind and listening to the clients before offering a solution. Many of them noted that it is important to listen to their clients in order to build rapport and a relationship. In order to build a true partnership and collaborative relationship, there needs to be trust. Consultants also stressed the importance of delivering what they promise to build credibility and trust, in addition to add value in the organization which ultimately results in strengthening relationships with clients. Once clients begin trusting their consultants, relationships become even more collaborative in nature. Heather described her thinking behind the strategic approach to establishing partnership with her clients:

It's funny because as the consultant you want to show that you are the expert but I have found that a lot of times you can't show that the first meeting because it turns people off.

A lot of times if you are the expert and trying to show your expertise, you are almost telling them what is wrong and although they know they need help implementing something, they might feel like ‘ well you think you know everything’ – people don’t like know it all. At least that’s what I think. They want to know yes you know something but they also want to know that you are going to listen to what they have to say. That brings in that transparency, trust, and collaboration. I find it very interesting ... I’ve known people who have gone in and act like they know it all and I can see the turn off.

Partnership is essential throughout the engagement process. Brody explained that he has “check in points as we go along to see how things are going.” The partnership is a two way conversation and engagement as feedback and input are shared from the consultant to the client, and vice versa. Brody also shared that after the implementation phase, he might meet with his client to discuss “what worked well, what could be improved in the process” as well as continuously “be informed of major changes happening in the organization so that I can be represent the organization when I’m working with the employees in the organization.”

Cara noted that it may be difficult to access the c-suite as regularly as possible, however partnership is still necessary. She explained:

It’s not transactional ...it might be important to note that I usually work with the c-level and c-levels are always busy. Being truly collaborative can be physically impossible. What you need to be with them is basically doing it all, but touching base with them constantly to make sure that everything you’re doing is in sync with what you laid out together and in sync with how they want it done in sync with what is going on and what is visible with others .... It’s continuous.

Partnership means having a two-way relationship. In fact, many consultants suggested that the effectiveness of their consulting is based on their ability to create a climate of trust in order to allow for a two-way relationship. It is important to collaborate with various stakeholders within the organization. Izzy explained that because everything changes, there is a constant need to be in collaboration with the client:

Everything changes, the economy will change, the bottom line will change and so often I'll have meetings with the chief financial officer of the organization throughout the year to make sure I understand how they're doing financially, to understand how the organization is managing, what their trouble spots are, what are their stressors in our engagements... what kinds of issues come up that might distract the players that are involved in the process and what I may be involved in and so better clients who do a really good job keeping me informed will call me ahead of time and let me know. For example, it may be 'one of the guys in your class, he quit last week and he made a big to-do about it and the class is a little upset' ... so it's a true partnership. I'm not as effective unless there is true partnership and transparency. If they don't tell me stuff, I can get tripped up and I tell them that's required. I'm going to see your operation anyway ... you might as well tell me. I set that stage early on. Making sure you have the 360 vision of every part of it. It's collaborative but often it's educational. They trust me to run the thing; they hired me to fix the problem ... I'm off fixing the problem but keeping in constant touch with them

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

In an attempt to answer the overarching research question regarding expert constants approaches to adding value to the organization, I asked the following interview question: How

do you assess the effectiveness and contributions to the client organization. Interestingly, many of the consultants initially responded by saying that they don't utilize formal assessments to evaluate their effectiveness and contribution to the organizations. Michelle's response mirrored all other responses: "you just keep on getting paid and being asked to come back." David added "frankly asking you back means that they are perceiving you as value. If folks don't believe you really have added value, they say thank you very much when you're done and you never hear from them again."

Feedback from the clients was another common assessment technique shared by the participants. Consultants shared a couple of different ways in which they illicit feedback including through ongoing conversations with their clients, surveys, and testimonials. Michelle noted "I debrief with the clients...that's probably the biggest thing. I ask them what I could have done better and if there is anything I can do to better support them." Heather provided an example of an informal feedback from her client: "I had a CEO who just said to me that you've been very helpful in changing the culture of our organization...so when I get that kind of feedback, it means it was a successful engagement."

Only two clients identified formal assessments as their way of evaluating their effectiveness and contributions to their client organization. Michelle shared that she has done a pre- and post- assessment on a few of her engagements:

I did an assessment at the beginning of one leadership program, 360 feedback. DDI 9<sup>th</sup> house through the Center for Creative Leadership has a tool called 'Time to Change' and we came back and they picked a couple development things that they wanted to focus on

and then six months later we reassessed on that. This gave us very nice quantitative data to show the executives the effectiveness of the program. This is not common though.

David also reflected on his practice of using formal assessments:

I've done very empirical measures. If you could reduce the cycle of a process from 30 to 5 days and you can actually remove the man power it takes to do something, then those are very measurable and tangible, calculable business benefits. So not everything is measured on the soft side. Some of it becomes tangible and measurable. Ultimately if I see my organization continue to grow, if growth is the goal, to increase its revenue, to increase its profits, to increase its customer satisfaction, to increase its stakeholder value, to increase employee satisfaction, those are all very good measures that I'm being successful.

Heather suggested that using engagement surveys that companies have could also be another measure of success. Additionally, "you can also look at the company and if they are being profitable. You can look at their HR metrics but also financial and operational metrics and tie them back to the softer side of OD."

David was the only consultant who believed that formal assessments are a common thread to his practice. For the others, Izzy's response synthesized their shared perspectives of the value of using formal assessments:

There is always something I need to do better...everything, always. That's just a baseline. How do I assess it? I gotta do a better job of this, but I do take survey forms and ask people for their feedback and stuff...but mostly I ask the organization for testimony on how they're functioning now. For example, we were here and now we are here... and all

those conversations we had in the middle, were they correct? Did those things happen? So they may say there were changes, but I help them to come up with anecdotal evidence ... you see it immediately in the culture but they then give me the testimonials of what exactly the behaviors we were looking for were, are we getting those, and we enumerate those ... and so we go through the whole laundry list of what are we looking to fix, change, improve... and sometimes it's way better than we originally thought would be. That's where I always want to keep my clients... pleasantly surprised. If you are lucky enough to get the organization to measure the financial performance and gains you made for them, the turnover rate, the retention rates, the number of complains, the amount of waste, the amount of revenue. You can do what we call "borrow indicators" when in many occasions you have to do because people don't set up really good systems for measurements ... They're flawed. My dream team would be to have a team to look over measurements, but then it's almost like a study ... companies don't want to spend the money, they want to fix and once they see the behavioral changes and the bottom line get better, they are like "yippee we are done we are done we are done" ... and they stop measuring which I never recommend but they do. That part is hard because I would love to show them how they can continue ... they can only be students for so long then they just want to get back to work.

Data from the interviews indicates that many consultants do not rely on a formal assessment process to evaluate the effectiveness of their work with their clients. Rather, they often rely on the feedback they receive from their clients during their encounters, or simply view continued work as an indicator of success.

### **Valuable Advice to Others Pursuing Consulting as a Profession**

Data were also collected to answer the overarching research question: How do expert consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success? One way of collecting this information was via one of the interview questions which asked consultants: What would you like to have known when you first started consulting that you believe would be most beneficial to others considering this career? Two subthemes emerged from the participants' reflections on both the personal and professional advice they have received from others and they would offer to others throughout their career. The two subthemes included the criticality of gaining meaningful experience and staying current in the field.

#### **Experience matters**

All of the clients stressed the importance of having experience in the field to build to understand the variety of issues organizations may have as well as develop a toolbox of techniques to enhance their value to the organization. According to Brody:

Consultants need to know information. Consulting is one business where being older is actually an advantage because you have experience. I kind of smile at 30 year olds who are going to be consultants or coaches...there are a lot of life lessons after you've worked 30-35 years that you've learned, a lot of workshops you've been to. First of all, it's knowing the information. That's one thing. I'm very careful. I take assignments where I know the work. I won't take assignments that I don't know the area well enough to lead people through.

Izzy explained how experience helps enhance the consulting practice:

You have to be savvy and have had all the experiences about different problems and root causes of issues with organizations – culturally, politically, etc – then how to confront a group of employees. A lot of practice, and knowing what you are going to observe...having some sense about what you're walking into and how you are going to interact.

David echoed Izzy's thoughts by reflecting on his own experience:

I learned the methodologies of consulting by working myself through them. If someone tells me they want to be a consultant, I would tell them to do 1 of 2 things. Either make sure you spend enough time working for one of the companies that represent what you would like your client base to be so you truly understand their culture, how they work, and their issues. Looking back, I would have enjoyed another 4-5 years of experience in different ways, perhaps even with another company getting more internal experience along the way. Or go to work for a consulting company that has well developed methodologies, practices, tools, and content and learn exactly what they do and how they do it. I never had that so I had to figure it out myself.

Cara used her own example of how she gained experience and offered that as advice for others who want to pursue consulting.

I would recommend, if there is a way you can sub contract to start out with. I was lucky, the last job I was in, a guy who came into the company then got let go of, he started the founder of another consulting firm that I've worked with ... he loved me, so that's how he became a consultant. He called me after he started his own company and asked me to join and subcontract. It was also very good that I was not the lead in my first engagement.

I was a partner and not the lead during that first 6 week engagement. Myself and the other consultant (the lead) we were a team so I was involved in all aspects of the engagement with the client. He had the client relationship so even he had the 1x1 with the client, then I did. He taught me in going to meet with the client, he'd say here is what I'm taking in and we would even put together briefs or talking points for the client and he would come out of the meetings and we would co-strategize. I had worked with other consultants before but it was nice to not be the lead the very first time I went in for an engagement. If you know somebody who is already a consultant and they can get you on a gig with them...anyone who can mentor you on your first gig. I would get as much help with a mentor...even if it's your first job, making sure you have a mentor there with the front end.

Izzy's explanation of the need for experience covered all the aspects of consulting: "get the full range of business competencies. You need to learn how to sell, deliver, and be trustworthy." Echoing the consulting skills shared earlier, the advice shared by many of the consultants also echoed the need to build interpersonal, communication, and consulting skills through years of experience.

### **Staying Current**

When I asked the participants to share their advice, all of them emphasized the importance of remaining current in the field. They shared a variety of ways by which this can occur, including: subscribing to business related newsletters, finding unique resources, being well-read, attending conferences, becoming certified, and being involved in professional and industry associations. Regardless of which methods were enacted to remain current and

knowledgeable of trends in the field, the participants believed that this is essential in order to be of most value to the client organization.

The advice of remaining current in the field was often accompanied by the importance of being well read. This was evident in Gavin's suggestion:

The biggest thing is to be current in your field by reading. I subscribe to a few things that I get emails, some of them are daily and I will sit there for two hours or so reading of these things whether they're cases or ideas on dealing with employee issues. I look at a lot of things then I will take some of it and use it with my own clients. There are a lot of laws, but it's really the court case...if you're not keeping up with the latest and greatest court cases on all these things, you are going to fall behind.

Echoing Gain, Michelle also spoke about the value of being current in the field by being well read. She said "I use Ted talks, books...I have access to downloadable business library that I put on my phone and listen when I do my dishes, walking the dog. It's called books 24x7." David added "I think I ordered 9 new books this weekend. I am always reading. Clients will say to me have you read this one or that one, and I'll pick it up right away.

Brody offered more specific sources he uses to stay current:

I subscribe to number of newsletters online that I read – Malcome Gladwells... I read all the time, and Wharton has wonderful leadership and management articles. I try to find good resources that most people around don't know about and I read those so I have new information to bring in.

Brody also suggested to “make a practice of reading at least one business book every quarter. If you read 4 or 5 a year, pick some good ones and read those so you can stay current.”

In addition to reading on the latest trends, many participants spoke of the value of attending conferences to learn about innovative practices and changes in the industry that could enhance their effectiveness with their client organizations. More specifically, Brody shared the multiple associations that he belongs to and benefits from:

I am aware of what my clients need and what issues they are facing and so I’ll go to something that they’re going to need. I am a member of several professional associations in Jacksonville – probably about 6 different groups: SHRM, ASTD, First Coast Coaches Association, Florida Diversity Council, First Coast Diversity Council. I’m also on the advisory board of Catholic Charities of Workforce Development, and a member of the Business Leadership Network. I don’t have time to go to all of the meetings but I strategically try to go to at least 4 a year of each group.

A couple participants shared that they stay current by attending classes, becoming certified and learning from other experts. Izzy spends “5 to 10 grand per year” on her own development. She added that “sometimes my client pays for it. Good clients will reciprocate. If they need something, they may send me to learn and they pay for it because they know it will help them.” Heather shared:

I do executive coaching but am not certified, so I’m going to get certified in coaching because I think companies like to see that ... plus it’s a development for me. I have also signed up for Leader Cast. Although this is more motivational, it deals with leadership and just listening to other experts.

A couple of participants stated that they typically do not attend the professional association conferences. David has been a consultant for over 30 years. He explained:

I am not at the state in my life where I do association work. One of the reasons is that a lot of the goals of associations is networking and I'm not particularly interested in this stage of my career in networking. I am passed that. Also, a lot of beginners are trying to still figure it out. I mentor folks, but I'm not willing to give up an evening that I would otherwise be at home with my wife or doing some very important work where I can be making more of a meaningful contribution to the world.

Whereas David is toward the back end of his career and feels that he has more to add to the professional organizations rather than gain value, Cara chooses her professional organizations more mindfully. She explained:

I don't really do professional organizations and I never have. Not that I have anything particular against them but in the cases that I do them, I do the ones that have follow ups. For example, have you heard of the term master mind groups? If you do anything for 3 or 4 days, do this! Almost inevitably they say they're going to group you up and meet with each other for an hour every week over the phone and as you go put this stuff to action, you guys will talk to each other about your goals and this kind of stuff.... When I go to these things, I always sign up for a master mind group. I will be with a group for a year or so. They're relatively pricey the classes and you can get them really super pricey. But regardless of managing change, change management, OD type stuff... at the core it's all people. I'm really good at reading and dealing with people, and I think this kind of

training has really helped me... just to understand people. Emotional intelligence in a professional environment

### **Consulting Profession**

A secondary theme that emerged throughout the interviews was aspects related to assets and liabilities of pursuing a career in the consulting profession. Although there were no formal interview questions designed to explore the challenges and benefits related to the consulting profession, all of the participants shared what they believed to be the pros and cons to their profession.

In speaking about their profession, consultants expressed enjoying several aspects of their careers. At times, those same aspects they enjoyed, they also found as a challenge. These aspects include: flexibility, variety of work, and the relationship aspect.

#### **Flexibility and independence**

Flexibility of decision making and scheduling make the profession particularly attractive to consultants. All of the consultants are independent, and thus work for themselves. Having the flexibility to charge their clients a certain fee, having a variety in their work, and making decisions based on their own expertise were just a few benefits associated to flexibility. Brody shared:

I may work a lot but I have the flexibility to do what I want to do. I'm very independent and always have been. There are weeks I work 7 days if there is a lot going on. But I also have to tell myself, I do play tennis a few times a week, I do water aerobics, I can sleep in if I want to...I can work until 9 pm if I want to.

Cara discussed the flexibility around her decision making and approach: “ I come in and I leave...it’s mine. Everything is me... including how I engage my client. I need to know how they need to be engaged and I need to know how I can engage them.” David added “at this stage of my life, there is very little I don’t like about consulting...I have figured out how to do things the way I want to do them.”

Although most of the consultants discussed having long-term engagements with their clients lasting beyond one contract, Cara identified the flexibility of working relationships as a pro. She said “what I love is what I loved when I watched other people do it. How consultants get to come in, do their thing, and then leave...how great is that? Willingness to throw myself into something short term and short term is 18 months.”

### **Working Too Much**

There is also a flip side to that flexibility and independence which is working too much. One consultant explained:

The challenge of that is that it could be very tiring...sometimes I could be exhausted but I have to work. I know I need to kick something to gear tomorrow... I’ve thought about this issue and it needs to be dealt with...sometimes people stuff, and I can’t put my finger on it...sometimes people stuff comes up and I’ll have a human reaction and realize I’ve dealt with that before ... and I’ll rethink the conversation and things that I could have said better. Or ill throw the repercussions ... I know they’ll go with person B or C with their story and I’m going to have to hit B and C now ... there is still politics and such. That’s not my favorite.

Although consultants have the freedom and independence to choose their work, there are times that their work is dependent on their clients' needs. Heather reflected:

If you have five clients who all want something on Monday and it's Friday at 3:00 pm, you are working all weekend, so whatever you had planned don't get to think you can do that. But then there are times that clients say they want something but not yet...so you are sitting at home wondering what you're going to do. So my timing is not always my own.

### **Helping Profession**

Working too much is often the result of valuing the relationships and caring about the clients, thus wanting to help them. Echoing the other consultants, David explained:

There are times I allow myself to get over committed. That's my fault. That will happen when a client all of a sudden develops some sort of need...and I've already filled up my calendar between all of my clients. Then that will tax me and I know I have over extended myself.

Gavin expressed:

I love the relationships with a lot of different people and the variety of work. It is very pleasurable to do aspects of my consulting work in which I'm helping my client live to develop their strategic plan, look at their forward direction, solve an organization problem, and think through how they want to do this.

### **Lonesome profession**

A challenge shared by 70% of the participants was that consulting is a lonesome profession. Although they all work closely with their clients, a common thread that emerged was

lack of camaraderie with other consultants. Of the 70% of participants, a phrase used by all of them was: “it is a very lonely world.” Michelle shared her struggles with working alone:

I miss working on a team at times because I get energized by other people and talking about ideas. It’s a hard field. I have resisted working with others because of the complexities. I like to be in control...doing things my own way and not compromising. For a while I was working out of my office and I almost died...dying on the vine! From isolation! So I sated working in a shared workplace downtown – it’s a place where independent people go in and you can join and go to work. You can rent an office... a dedicated office or show up with your roller bag for the day and work. That has changed everything for me.

Brody touched on the lack of camaraderie:

There are times you would really like to have other people you could go to and say “this is my situation, what advice do you have for me? But it’s a kind of a profession, especially in Jacksonville where I learned early on. I used to be very open about who my clients were and what organizations I worked for, and then I had several of my clients say “this consultant tried to come and get our business” and my clients were very sweet and told them no. This taught me a bit more about being careful regarding saying who my client organizations are because some consultants who are looking try to go get business with those companies.

Similar to the other 70%, Gary discussed the aspect of competition among consultants:

There is absolutely a bit of competition there. If I see a competitor’s picture, right away I question ... how did she get in there? It’s almost friendly but not at the same time. We’ll

talk to one another and find out what works and what doesn't. But you can see there is a bit of a wall that we're not going to be open and honest about everything.

There were a couple of consultants who did not perceive competition and loneliness to be an issue in their practice. Izzy expressed:

I don't feel competition. I am sure people feel it from me, but I don't think of it that way at all. There is plenty of room in this town. A matter of fact, there are five consultants in this town that I have been a consultant to help them with their own business. There is one that I helped redefine her practice. She paid me to do it and it was scary for her to have me see what she does. I think she still feels nervous about me but I don't compete with her.

A couple of consultants also sub-contract some of their work, and thus they feel that they have others to "commiserate with." Izzy added that she is usually "on the other ends of those calls" meaning that others call her for advice. Others shared that their partnership with different people within the organization they work with helps them through the process.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to present an in-depth exploration of the themes that emerged from the data. I described the themes that emerged as a result of the research questions. This study was guided by the overarching research question focused on understanding the most influential strategies used by expert consultants to add value to their clients and to contribute to the growth of their organizations. Additionally, three supporting research questions were formed to understand consultants' strategies in identifying and addressing client needs, their experience with their clients, and their evolution of approach over time to enhance the process.

The contributions of the participants have provided knowledge and general insight into the strategies used by expert consultants as they add value and contribute to the growth of organizations. Their examples have helped clarify important aspects associated with organization development, as well as key competencies needed for expert consultants. Additionally, they identified strategies needed to effectively identify and address client needs, as well as the importance of relationship building for successful client-consultant engagements. Although not directly related to the research questions, consultants provided their perspectives on aspects of their profession that they find enjoyable and others that pose challenges.

Chapter V presents a summary of the study's findings and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the findings. Finally, recommendations for future research and Organization Development Consulting practices are offered.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

The inspiration to engage in this research stemmed from the desire to understand better the ways in which successful consultants help organizational leaders to cope with today's fast-paced changes, as well as enhance their capacity to strive beyond simply survival, but rather towards sustainable growth. In an ever-increasing world of mergers and acquisitions, organizational leaders can no longer simply change the way they do things based by relying on historical events to predict and resolve problems. Notably, today's emerging theories of change are based on scant change research (Burke, 2014). The complex interdependencies in today's global, digital era made it much more complex for organizational leaders to lead effectively within this unique context of change and ambiguity. Today, organizations operate in an intertwined complex web between internal and external influencers, and therefore are less able than ever to predict change (Burke, 2014). Increasingly, there is a pressing need for organizational leaders to understand and deal effectively with this new order of organizational problems that defy traditional problem-solving and change strategies (Burke, 2014; Grint, 2005; Senge, 2006). Organizational leaders are often not prepared to deal with these changes, and thus often hire external consultants to help them operate in ways that are more adaptable, transformative, and emotionally intelligent. The OD consultant's role often becomes that of a leader who helped the top executives in the organizations build capacity for change and become more effective and efficient in today's digitally complex world.

The present study was qualitative in nature, using in-depth interviewing to determine the factors perceived as the most effective in the consultants' work with their clients. The overarching goal of the study was to develop new knowledge to the field that would be valuable

in today's new paradigm of organizational development. This study appears to be the first of its kind to use an expert group to identify the behaviors, strategies, and competencies consultants use to help enhance organizational effectiveness and efficiency, and to enhance growth and build organizational capacity. The study sought to answer the primary research question: How do expert consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success? I conducted a total of seven interviews with practicing expert consultants within the Jacksonville area. Through the collection and analysis of information through in-depth, face-to-face interviews, seven themes emerged. These consultants' knowledge of and experience with the field of consulting were informative and resulted in variables and themes considered to be most critical to the success of OD consulting.

In chapter IV, I presented a detailed analysis of the findings from the analyses of qualitative data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interview questions. The voices of the seven selected participants were the source for gaining knowledge and insight into the observations, practices, and professional experiences of consultants.

Within this section, I discuss my interpretation of what I believe to be the most salient findings of the study as they relate to the extant literature on OD consulting. The purpose of this section is not to summarize every major finding, but rather to interpret the findings and provide context for selected findings. In doing so, I will share what I found to be surprising while asserting what I believe to be the most meaningful, along with the implications for the practice of consulting. I will share not only those findings that aligned with prior research, but also those findings that offer new insight by contradicting prior research. My interpretation of the most significant findings of the study will be organized and discussed using the study's overarching research questions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The overarching research problem of this study relates to how consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success. Because Organization Development (OD) underpins and delimits the study, it is important to first understand the current framework and how it relates to the review of literature in the field of organization development consulting.

As indicated in chapter II, there is a lack of consensus of how organization development is defined and/or described. A study conducted in 2002 yielded 27 different definitions of organization development (Egan). Jackson (2006) offered a definition of OD that appeared to combine many of the components of earlier definitions by other scholars. Jackson's definition of OD was:

A planned effort led by managers to achieve long-range and organization-wide goals, supported from the top and designed to increase organizational effectiveness through planned intervention in the organization's process, particularly through a more collaborative management of organizational culture, using the consultant-facilitator role, applied behavioral science theory, with an emphasis on developing human potential and scientific approaches that supplement practical experiences. (p. 24)

Common themes that emerged from the consultants in the present study as they defined OD included: (a) planned strategy to help organizations move forward, (b) focus on the human relations aspect of the organization, (c) change management as the organization moves from one state to another, and (d) building capacity (building capacity within the clients in the

organizations so that they can think and act strategically to deal with their organizational dynamics and issues.

Until this point of the study, I have referred to my participants as OD consultants. It is important to note that the participants themselves use several different terms to relate to their practice. Thus, the umbrella of terms that fall within the type of consulting discussed throughout this study will need to be expanded to include the following: human resource management consulting, change management, and organization development consulting,

### **Research Questions**

*Primary Question: How do expert OD consultants add value and contribute to the growth of their clients to promote organizational success?*

Multiple interview questions were designed to help answer the primary research question. The semi-structured interviews provided participants with an open forum to that they could respond without restrictions and provide their perspectives to support and explain their thinking behind their responses. All of the themes that emerged from the study help support the primary research question.

More specifically, as supported by the literature and participant responses, building organizational capacity is the most critical way to add value to organizations and contribute to the growth of the clients to promote organizational success. As the literature supports, consultants are hired for their OD expertise and knowledge so that they can help organizational leaders create opportunities to improve the speed and quality of their decisions and performance that impact the organization (Block, 2000; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). Consultants today need to help organizations go beyond simply surviving, and rather help them build

capacity to thrive in today's rapidly changing and complex global environment, taking into account the internal and external organizational environments (Burke, 2014). By interviewing a group of expert practicing consultants, I identified key strategies needed to help organizations acquire necessary skills for sustainable change and to enhance effectiveness and efficiency within organizations. Consultants emphasized the criticality of building relationships with their clients that are collaborative. Through partnership and a collaborative relationship, consultants engage in a joint process with their clients that help them identify the problems within their organization (Bass, 1985; Schein, 1988). This is consistent with Bass' (1985) transformational leadership. Partnership and collaborative relationships throughout the process helps stimulate intellectual creativity within clients as they think about the overall organization at a deeper level in order to shift their behaviors and processes toward sustainable growth (Bass, 1985). Throughout the process of consulting, consultants help organizational leaders help themselves. By asking the right questions, consultants are helping shape the organizational focus by building capacity within their clients to understand better their organizations and articulate their problems in a way that they may not have been able to do in the past.

Transformational organizational change requires leadership, particularly from the top of the organization (Burke, 2014). Consultants discussed the importance of engaging with the executive suite as well as the role that those leaders at the top play in the overall process. Although the middle and lower levels become critical to the success of the overall efforts, the partnership between the consultant and the top of the organizational hierarchy is key to the ultimate success of the change (Burke, 2014).

In order to determine whether value has been added to the organization and capacity has been enhanced within the clients, I believe there is a need to assess effectiveness. Thus, I

included a question in the interview protocol in order to better understand how consultants assess the effectiveness of their work. Ironically, only two consultants expressed using formal methods to assess effectiveness of their work, whereas the others rely on methods of informal assessment by gathering feedback through continuous dialogue with their clients.

A challenge shared among five participants was that consulting is a lonesome profession. Common phrases shared among participants were that it is a “lonely world” and there is a lack of “camaraderie” and a bit of “competition.” These findings further supported the ambiguity of consulting as a profession (Kakabadse, Louchart, & Akabadse, 2010). Furthermore, the lack of camaraderie among consultants makes it difficult for them to collaborate and share best practices in order to enhance the overall practice of consulting. These findings also help to explain the lack of empirical research on the topic. By improving the consulting profession, and incorporating discussion and information sharing among practitioners, understanding could be enhanced on the most effective strategies for building capacity within organizations to address the complex and competitive reality of today’s environment.

*Secondary Question 1: What key strategies do OD consultants use throughout the process of identifying and addressing clients’ (organizations’) needs?*

Aspects of complexity and systems theory were discussed in the consultants’ responses (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990; Uhl-Bien et al, 2007). The interconnectedness of human dynamics and processes within organizations was commonly addressed in the responses of the consultants. In order to be effective in consulting, it is critical to recognize that change within one area of the organization affects other parts of the organization. Consultants must take that into account as they work with the organizational system as well as its sub-

systems. Therefore, there is a need to explore and understand the people dynamics and interactions not only at the beginning of the process, but rather throughout the entire process of consulting and change.

The competitive, complex, digitalized, and global era in which we live makes it impossible for organizations to survive without keeping up and competing with their external environments. Some of these external factors include economic conditions, historical forces, technological changes and regulatory influencers (Burke, 2014). Ironically, none of the consultants addressed external factors impacting organizational development and change. It is imperative to note organizations today are not only dependent on their environments for survival, but they actually interact with their external environment making the relationship incredibly significant (Burke, 2014). External and internal factors cause constant interruptions to the process, and therefore, there is a need to anticipate interruption through the journey that Burke refers to as “revolutionary” (2014, p. 21). Change in today’s complex organizations is a constant, thus making it necessary for organizational leaders to embrace change and develop ways in which they continually improve and change themselves. Given the scarcity of literature to account for external and internal influencers on organizations, it would have been interesting and to hear first hand from consultants themselves about the strategies they use to facilitate clients’ awareness of and ability to deal with both of these forces. However, this was not a question addressed in the study.

The literature identified transformational leadership as a model to better guide strategies for sustainable growth in our fast-paced digital era in which change is no most unpredictable (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Burke, 2014). The findings of the present study demonstrate that the goal of consultants is to help organizational leaders develop better strategies to lead

organizational change. Consultants need to consider individual needs of achievement and growth of their clients. More specifically, they need to be cognizant of their clients' needs at various phases of the engagement, and change their strategies to help create learning opportunities to enhance development of their clients. Again, consultants did not explicitly address the importance of organizations being an open or loosely constructed systems most capable of juggling between internal and external demands (Burke, 2014). It is important to note that they were not specifically asked to comment on external factors. Given the scarcity of literature on organizational development consulting, it is possible that these consultants lack the skills or lack the ability to articulate how to help organizational leaders effectively deal with these interdependencies. Whatever the reason, this study's pool of consultants clearly failed to articulate the need to focus on factors external to organizations.

As stated earlier, collaboration and partnership at the executive level, sometimes referred to as "C-suite is critical at all levels. Specific to identifying and addressing needs of the organization, working with the most top level of the organization helps align the intervention and change strategies with the overall goal and vision of the organization. The C-suite knows the most about the organization and typically has the broadest perspective of the organization as a whole. Thus, collaboration at this level enables consultants to understand better the system and identify patterns within the organization (Yoon & Kuchinke, 2005). These findings support the literature in that problem solving becomes more effective when the client owns the problem and identifies the process that needs to be improved. Moreover, the client's commitment for implementing the action plan is enhanced if they are involved in the entire process of problem solving (Schein, 1988).

*Ancillary Question 2: What is the overall consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention?*

Consistent with the process consultation models described in the literature review (Block, 2011; Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1969), joint collaboration and partnership were identified as essential throughout the consultant-client experience from the initial client request to the final intervention. As described through the words of the consultants and Schein's model (1969), it is important to fully be involved in the consulting process and engage with the clients.

Collaborating and interacting at all stages helps build strong relationships that further engage the clients in the change process. More specifically, it was evident that learning and reflection are integrated throughout the experience between consultants and clients as they collaboratively identify problems, rank problems according to priority, identify solutions, develop appropriate actions, and modify these actions as necessary. These findings support previous literature on action research (Lewin, 1951) and organizational learning (Argyris, 1976; Schein, 1995; Senge, 1990; and Schon, 1978).

Although process consultant as described by Schein (1969) identified two key phases, with six stages of problem solving, the consultants of the present study did not seem to follow a concrete process. Rather, they collectively stated the need for constant dialogue with their clients to assess the progress at various stages, and amend their approach if necessary to best meet their client's need. It was evident that this strategy seems more natural among the consultants. Given their years of experience and organizational knowledge, they are able to comfortably transition between stages of problem solving as they see fit.

Across consultants, the need to build capacity within clients in order to enhance growth and add value to the organization was identified. This concept is supported in the literature as consultants aim to transfer their expertise to their clients in order to enhance their capacity for sustainable change (Argyris, 1976; Block, 2011; Rothwell & Sullivan, 1995; Schein, 1995; Schon, 1978). Scholars in the area of organizational development and change management pointed out the need for top executive organizational leaders to be able to be visionary with a focus and know how to motivate collective action by others in their organization (Burke, 2014). Therefore, it is important for organizational development consultants to help their clients build capacity in these areas. As identified by the consultants, key factors important in the consultant-client experience include: (a) establishing trust and a collaborative relationship with the client so that they can be engaged and enhance their capacity to most effectively solve problems; (b) paying close attention to the people dynamics and relationships as well as the organizational problems; (c) and building a strong partnership where the client is willing to be thoroughly involved in the process. These findings support previous research on flawless consulting (Block, 2011), action research (Lewin, 1951) and process consultation (Schein, 1969).

Consultants identified key characteristics needed during their engagement with their clients. These characteristics include discipline, confidence, influencing, and analytical skills. Confidence is one of the qualities that I find important to note. More specifically, consultants shared that there is a need to demonstrate confidence. Whereas a few consultants discussed confidence as an important contributor to building trust and credibility, some identified it as critical. One consultant even defined the level of confidence required as “cocky.” Burke (2014) identified confidence, cognitive abilities, risk taking, and emotional intelligence as key skills needed by organizational leaders. Because the focus of the study was aimed at identifying key

strategies and characteristics needed by consultants, I did not inquire about the need of skills for the organizational leaders. Perhaps these are some of the skills that consultants help organizational leaders develop during their coaching. According to Witherspoon and White (1998), the focus on coaching is to help develop skills, enhance performance, and to help with the executive's agenda. This too would be an interesting component for a future study.

*Ancillary Question 3: How do OD consultants' approaches evolve over time to enhance the process?*

A common finding that emerged in the present study was the need for consultants to change their approach at certain times in order to enhance the process. The change in approach is often as a result of the clients' specific needs. Across consultants, resistance was identified as one of the challenges that often surface during the consultant-client process. The resistance is a predictable and natural emotional reaction to the process of facing challenges and/or change, and should be acknowledged as an essential component of the learning process. These findings were consistent with the literature in that these emotions must be expressed and accepted, and the need for consultants' to change their approach according to their clients' needs is essential (Block, 2011; Schein, 1969). Block (1981) explained this concept by claiming "resisting clients are defending against the fact that they are going to have to make a difficult choice, take an unpopular action, confront some reality that they have been emotionally trying to avoid" (p. 148). Burke (2014) asserted that although this may be viewed as resistant, in reality they may not be opposed to change at all. Rather, they may be ambivalent and fear losing something or may simply be skeptical with a desire for more information to help them decide. Consultants shared that they often use this resistance as a learning opportunity with their clients in order to educate them and provide them with the information they may need. Consistent with Weick's (1995)

thinking, dealing with resistance calls for a need to understand what change means for those in the organization. The goal of consultants is to facilitate understanding by helping their clients “make sense” of the situation and try to solve the problem of differing needs rather than force them to overcome resistance. Consultants shared that at times they will need for them to take a different strategy than they may have preferred in order to meet their clients half way. By doing this, they build trust and can at a later point address bigger problems within the organization – when their clients are more ready to do so.

Another common finding, also consistent with the literature, is the need for consultants to be supportive yet also have a balance between sensitivity and directness (Block, 2011). Consultants of the present study emphasized the importance of having the difficult conversation with their clients during those times of resistance to help them recognize the problems that may be deeper rooted and not easily observable at the surface level. Knowing when to have the difficult conversations right away rather than at a later time depends on the consultant’s understanding of their clients. Thus, it is imperative that consultants be able to identify, understand, and manage not only their own emotions, but the emotions of their clients. Consultants identified interpersonal skills that help build relationships with their clients as well as be sensitive and understanding of their needs. These findings are consistent with the literature on social and emotional intelligence (Burke, 2014; Goleman, 1998; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Being aware of their clients’ need is key to most effectively addressing those needs and emotions. Furthermore, consultants must be aware of their own emotions and remain calm and collected despite any emotional or behavioral outburst demonstrated by their clients (Goleman, 1998; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

### **Application of Conceptual Framework to Findings**

The purpose of the original conceptual framework (Figure 4) as discussed in chapter II was to organize key ideas and concepts that undergirded this study. The conceptual framework was created during the literature review process and used as an abstract way to represent the possible explanations for the research, as well as to help ensure relevance and content validity in the design of the interview protocol for the study. Figure 5 presents the original conceptual framework followed by the revised conceptual framework shown in Figure 6. The revised conceptual framework is a visual demonstration of process consultation. In essence, beyond the foundational organization development theories, this demonstrates the collaborative partnership between the client and consultant and how their relationship impacts organizational development and change that add value and enhance organizational capacity.

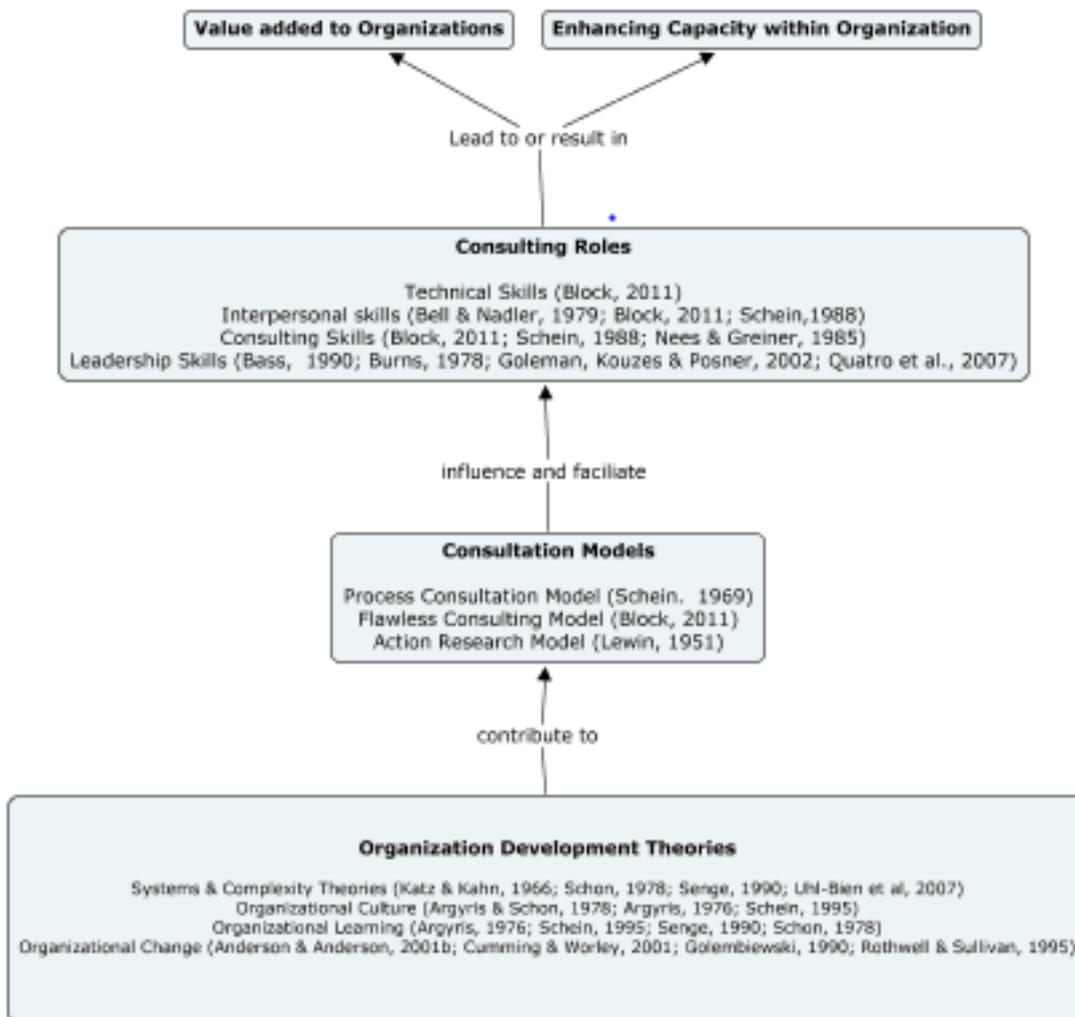


Figure 5. Original conceptual framework of the organization development and consulting theories contributing to effective consulting engagement

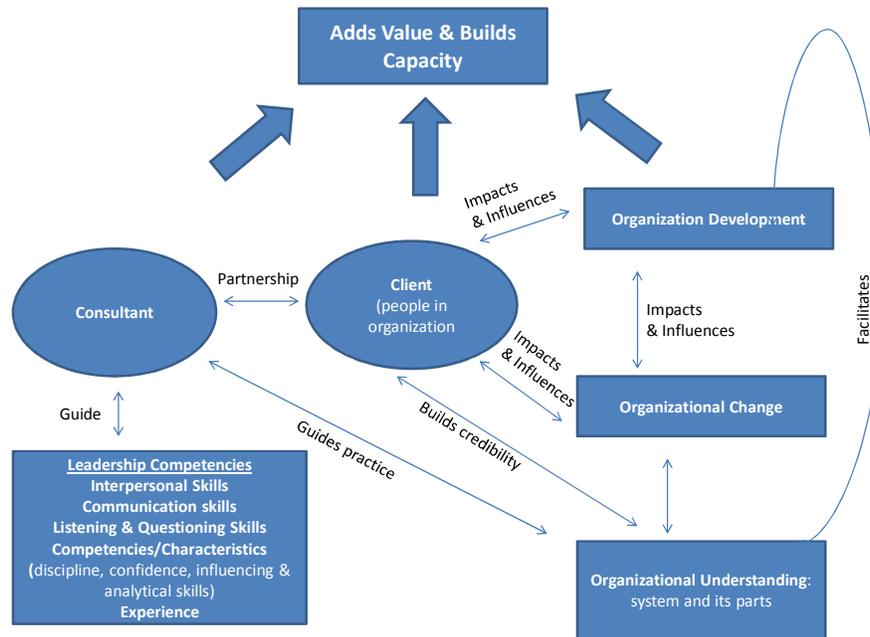


Figure 6. Revised Conceptual Framework: A visual relationship of the key concepts identified in the literature as well as the results of the study as identified through analysis and interpretation of the data.

### Delimitations of the Study

The study had several delimitations. First, the study captured the perspectives of the participants at a single point in time (both chronologically—[during my interviews]—and in terms of the individual consultants' professional trajectories). Secondly, the study only focused on the perspectives of OD consultants (thus, it excludes management consulting, IT consulting, financial consulting, and internal consultants). Third, the study focused on the perspectives of the consultants and did not take into account any observations or conversations with those who work with consultants. Finally, the study focused only on consultants in the Jacksonville Florida location.

The study also had several limitations. Delimiting the study to consultants' perspectives had limitations with regards to a holistic view of the phenomenon. Given the competitive nature of the consulting industry, there was no guarantee that the participants openly shared their experiences and respond to the interview questions as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Knowledge and insight were simply gained from what the participants said they do; no formal observations of these engagements actually occurred. This lack of data could potentially provide an incomplete picture of how the process truly occurs from the perspectives of those skillful consultants. I did however take steps to build rapport in an attempt to develop a wholesome relationship with my participants so they felt comfortable and fully engaged in the dialogue.

Delimiting the study only to OD consultants in the Jacksonville metropolitan area also introduced limitations with regard to transferability to other settings. Participants of this study were limited to consultants who practice organizational development, primarily in business environments in Jacksonville. Moreover, the purpose of the study was to better understand the process of consultation, and more specifically business consultants. Thus, questions may be raised regarding generalization of data and subsequent finding to consultants working in other settings. However, it is also important to note that qualitative research is not meant to fully predict behavior or activity in a similar context, but rather expand an understanding that the possibility of such behaviors occurring in similar contexts does exist. Additionally, it is important to note that Jacksonville geographically is the largest city in the United States, and it has a large metropolitan area within the city limits. There are many prominent corporations and organizations within Jacksonville including headquarters of several Fortune 500 companies. Because of the city's inexpensive business and labor costs and low taxes, coupled with its warm weather and availability of investments, entrepreneurs from top metropolitan areas like New

York, Boston, and even London are being drawn to Jacksonville. A statement recently received from the city's Office of Economic Development referred to Jacksonville as a "hidden jewel for entrepreneurs" (Carter, 2014). Therefore, although the consultants for this specific study were limited to the Jacksonville area, I do believe that their work in the business industries in Jacksonville is a good representation of the types of engagements they would have in any organizational consulting engagement.

### **Implications and Considerations**

My motivation for this study was to gain a deeper understanding of key strategies organizational development consultants use as they add value to their client organizations and build organizational and leadership capacity of their clients. To my knowledge, this study is the first of its kind and was a part of a critically needed study of OD consultants. This study seems to be unique in its focus on seeking the "voice" of OD consultants that I could not find in related literature and research. Although many books have been written by consultants or other practitioners based on their experiences and wisdom in organizational development and change, their views are not based on empirical study. Many of these books have been characterized as best sellers and often entertaining and well-written, but they are often too simplistic to provide practitioners and researchers much help in how to deal with change in today's complex organizational world (Burke, 2014). Thus, this research has serious implications that could be used for a broader context for OD practitioners, researchers, and organizations.

Given the scarcity of research in the field of organizational development consulting, there are many unknowns and assumptions related to consulting. This study provides serious implications for the field of consulting as for the first time, consultants themselves have shared

intricate and detailed information about their practice as well as their profession. This will help alleviate a lot of misconceptions related to consulting.

In this study, the perceptions of organizational factors including interpersonal dynamics as well as interconnections between systems internally and externally were identified and explored. How people, systems, and processes interact were viewed as having significant implications for organizational development, organizational change, and organizational decision making regardless of the context. The findings are therefore applicable to a variety of organizational settings including corporate, non-profit, governmental, and educational environments.

This research also has implications for organizational leaders, regardless of the type of organization they lead. Organizational leaders are responsible for successfully leading the organization and individuals within for optimized effectiveness and efficiency. This study is a very important representation of the dynamics of organizational behavior and structure, and can be instrumental in helping organizational leaders drive and manage changes within their organizations. The skills, characteristics, and competencies identified for consultants can easily be transferable for organizational leaders as they lead their organizations.

A client-consultant relationship is only effective if the relationship is truly that of collaborative and partnership. This study has implications for organizations looking to hire consultants. It provides a context to help organizations assess their processes, systems, and determine whether they have an environment that is ready and willing to seek a higher level of endeavor and growth.

This study also has implications for future researchers. The conceptual framework created for this study was very helpful as it provided me with the tools to think strategically about the various factors that impact organizational development. This framework would help future research as researchers choose to focus on specific aspects related to organization development, the consultant-client engagements, change management, and consulting approaches.

### **Data-based considerations**

One of the major findings in this study suggests that consultants lack collaboration, camaraderie, and partnership with other consultants in their profession. Many of them identified consulting as a lonesome and competitive field. Although they emphasized the importance of attending conferences to stay well informed about best practices and trends, consultants themselves do not share much with each other. Assertions have been made that sharing the general knowledge of consultants might be harmful to the consultants as the “value added of what they offer” (p. 1222) will decrease in the eyes of the client as they are no longer impressed by the “seemingly objective diagrams, tables, and figures” (Sorge & Van Wittleloostujin, 2004, p. 1222). However, I believe that peer groups and other industry resources will help consultants grow in their practice and in their profession. Based on my study, I believe there is a need for consultants to share best practices among one another and build a profession of information and knowledge sharing that will ultimately add value to their clients.

Another interesting finding was that none of the consultants referred to specific organizational development or change models they use in their practice. Sorge and Van Wittleloostujin (2004) also asserted that because good consultants don’t experience difficulty being chosen for their “ascribed professional judgment,” they have “no incentive to make this

judgment explicit, let alone public, for anyone could acquire and use it if they did which is not in their interest” (p. 1222). By sharing strategies and knowledge, it should help them to stay on the cutting edge of change needed for today’s organizations. Thus, one of my key suggestions from this research is for consultants to create communities of practice where practical models and applications of practice are shared among members of the profession.

### **Researcher’s conjectures informed by the results**

Organizational development and change efforts cannot occur effectively without considering what is happening in the organization’s internal and external environments (Burke, 2014). The external environment is changing at a more rapid pace than ever before, making it difficult for organizations to adapt fast enough to remain most relevant and successful. There is a need for more research to provide an empirical base to account for internal and external factors impacting organizations. Surprisingly, consultants within this study did not explicitly identify or address the criticality of external factors impacting organizational development. Given the scarcity of literature on organizational development in today’s world, it is possible that these consultants lack the skills or the ability to articulate how to help organizational leaders deal effectively with these intrusions. Future research studies might include specific interview questions to provide participants an opportunity to more directly address the impact of external and internal environments on the organization and their strategic efforts to deal with this important dimension of OD.

### **Considerations for future research**

The consultants who contributed to this study were interviewed at length and asked specific questions about the key strategies they use to help add value to their clients’ work and enhance organizational capacity. The identification of key themes inclusive of characteristics,

skills, and competencies of expert, successful consultants and key strategies used by them suggests that ongoing research is critical to understanding organization development these characteristics more fully. It is my hope that other empirical studies are conducted and more consultants' voices are heard and shared in the future.

One of the limitations of the present study was that it only captured the perspectives of seven consultants at a single point in time. Many of the participants emphasized the value and importance of time, and thus being conscious of that, I decided to limit my interviews to one sitting. For a future study, researchers might consider conducting interviews in more than one sitting. Additionally, it may be of benefit to ask the participants to reflect on and share specific examples from different periods of their consulting practice.

Future researchers might also expand the sample of participants to include the perspectives of clients. In this particular study, the consultants were hesitant and unwilling to participate if their clients were to be included. A future research might consider the use of surveys or questionnaires to examine the perspectives of clients to provide insight into what they value as effective and beneficial consulting strategies.

Researchers could also use other databases and variables to add to the knowledge base of the consulting practice. Asking consultants to share sample documents that they might use in their consulting engagements as they assess, identify, and address their clients' needs would enhance the understanding of the consultant-client engagement.

The present study only accounted for external independent consultants. A future research might include a sample of consultants from a consulting firm. Moreover, an informative study

could be developed by examining the differences and similarities in strategies among independent consultants and those who work in teams within a consulting firm.

The present study did not deliberately look at race, age, or gender as a factor. The sample of participants included predominately white middle-aged consultants within the Jacksonville area. For a future study, researchers might consider strategic sampling of participants using variables of age, race, gender, experience, and expand to geographical locations beyond Jacksonville, Florida.

### **Conclusion**

To my knowledge, the present study is one of its kind, designed to capture the collective voice of expert organizational development consultants. Most important, it was conducted to share knowledge about consultants and their best practices. Although there are many books on the best-sellers lists today written by consultants in the field of organizational development, empirical-research-based literature on organization development and change is quite scarce. Moreover, the literature that exists is based on scant change research, not accounting for today's intertwined and complex internal and external environmental factors that influence organizations. In fact, in an extensive study conducted in 2010 (Worley, Rothwell, & Sullivan) it was concluded that there has not been any new research-based studies on organizational change since 2002. Today's world calls for change models and strategies that are more continuous rather than discontinuous, and more revolutionary rather than evolutionary (Burke, 2014). This study is one of the very few known research-based investigations exploring first hand, from the words of practicing expert consultants, their perspectives on the key OD strategies they use with their clients as they help them plan for sustainable change. As noted, ironically none of the consultants discussed the impact of external environments or the need to change our thinking and planning to

account for today's loosely constructed organizational systems. It is debatable whether this is an oversight or simply an inability to fully articulate the interdependence of external and internal environmental factors due to consultants' limited knowledge on this major dimension of organizational functioning today. What is certain, however, is the need for further discussion, research, and strategies for organizational consultants to facilitate their client-management and leadership for change in the context of today's technology-driven, fast-paced world.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **INFORMED CONSENT**

#### **University of North Florida**

##### **Leading the Change: The Secrets of the Influential Consultant**

My name is Mona Vosoughi and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Florida. As a part of my dissertation, I am conducting a research study on the process of consulting in order to gain an understanding of these processes and strategies expert consultants use throughout their engagement with their clients, especially facing today's fast-paced and ever-changing business environment.

You are being asked to participate in this interview to help researchers better understand the process of consulting throughout your work with clients. The interview will be audio-recorded and should not take longer than 90 minutes. If you do not wish your interview to be recorded, please tell me before your interview begins. You may terminate the interview at any time for any reason with no penalty or consequences.

Your interview will be transcribed and the transcript will be forwarded to you for your feedback and verification of the accuracy of the content. Your feedback is crucial in validating the accuracy of the transcription.

Please keep in mind that confidentiality is taken very seriously and every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality and anonymity throughout the entire study. To ensure anonymity, a random letter will be selected to refer to you throughout the study. The interview results will be analyzed using a coding process to create an aggregate profile of consultant practices. Upon completion of the study, the results will be submitted in compliance with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida.

There are no foreseeable risks for taking part in this study. No forms of compensation will be offered for your participation. The potential benefit of the study is to obtain a better understanding of the construct of process consulting and the impact of influential consulting strategies to add value to your client organizations.

Throughout the study, please don't hesitate to ask any questions or address any concerns. Please feel free to fully express or explain any of your answers as your insights and knowledge are of great value and the primary focus of this study. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and time.

Sincerely,

Mona Vosoughi, Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Sandra Gupton, Dissertation Chair

*Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. Interview participants must be 18 years of age or older. By signing this consent form and completing this interview you are giving your consent to be involved in this research. If at any point you decide that you do not want to complete the interview, please inform the administrator. Your refusal to participate will not result in any penalty or loss of benefit.*

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Signature

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Date



## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Please describe your professional experiences leading to your current consulting career. How have these experiences impacted your practice?
- 2) How do you define OD consulting? How would you describe an effective consulting engagement?
- 3) What skills, attributes, or developmental activities are key for a consultant to become most effective? Which do you find as most essential and why?
- 4) How would you characterize or describe the most ideal relationships you have with key clients? What are some ways that you build trust with your client?
- 5) Please describe the process you typically use with your clients from the initial interaction throughout your engagement/work with them. How does the process change over time?
- 6) What are some ways you assess your client's needs at each step of the consulting process? How do you meet the differing needs of your clients at the different stages of the consulting process? How do your approaches evolve?
- 7) What strategies do you use to diffuse challenges and more effectively engage with your clients? What are some key challenges or barriers you have encountered throughout the process of your engagement with your clients?
- 8) What consulting behaviors/strategies/approaches have proved to be the most effective during your consulting process with your clients?
- 9) How do you assess the effectiveness and contributions to the client organization? How do you assess the effectiveness of the ongoing effectiveness of the process?

- 10) What would you like to have known when you first started consulting that you believe would be most beneficial to others considering this career?
- 11) As a consultant, what would you like to share that you haven't had a chance to share?