



**MASTERING THE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN CONSULTANT AND CLIENT**

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1. Strategic relationships: consultant and client

Leaders and executives of most organisations are typically engaged in many kinds of relationships, both internally, and with customers and external stakeholders. In most cases, most of these relationships are more operational than strategic in nature, but for the organisation to move forward, there will need to be a strategic component, for both internal and external relationships.

What gets in the way of strategic relationships is an organisational prejudice that favours the execution of strategy, an adherence to structure and the efficiency of technology over human relationships. Relationships continue to be treated as a necessary inconvenience, as if they have to be endured, and as a result opportunities to automate transactional activity or communicate electronically take precedence. What is difficult about managing relationships is that something is demanded of us that technology and automated routines do not require: the need to know oneself and be authentic (Peter Block, 2010).

Ironically, human relationships are the primary vehicle for engaging expertise: for gaining internal commitment and for ensuring sustainable implementation.

Organisation leaders may call on external consultants and other parties external to the organisation to engage in relationship building and strategy development. The consultant who is able to play the role of the trusted, strategic advisor will be an invaluable asset to organisation leaders. This is a difficult role, for many reasons, which are explored in this paper.

There is an essential set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed by both the consultant and the representative of the organisation to engage in a successful working relationship, especially when it concerns strategy, dealing with the uncertain and the unknown. This paper will focus particularly on the

relationship between the consultant as a strategic advisor and the client as an organisation leader.

2. Why are strategic relationships necessary and important?

A self-reflective process can work well, provided the leader has sufficient awareness of potential blind spots. Yet where the nature of change in the operating environment is volatile, and the pace of change is high, it can also become an unsustainable challenge for the leader to manage the strategic thinking and development process solo while maintaining sufficient focus on operational responsibilities.

The leadership role in an organisation can be isolating and anxiety provoking, particularly when questions about the future have to be considered, and risk and uncertainty variables come into play. The members of the executive team may have their own vested or competing interests that get in the way of providing the partnering and advice the organisation leader needs most. Staff in the organisation may not have the necessary exposure and experience to be able to advise the leader, especially when the operating environment is volatile, or changing rapidly. It may therefore be short-sighted for leaders to avoid engaging in those strategic relationships that hold the key to dealing effectively with complexity, uncertainty and change.

However, strategic relationships can be difficult. They must usually deal with uncertainty and complexity, and conflicting or competing interests may underpin them. They attempt to deal with risks, and there is generally a lot at stake, both for those engaged in the relationship, and for the organisation itself.

The consultant as a strategic advisor can bring the necessary experience and exposure to the organisation, and play a unique and multi-faceted role. This may

include being a facilitator, sounding board, information and analytical resource, coach, teacher and enabler. Working effectively together with an experienced consultant as a strategic advisor in a relationship of trust, the organisation leader may be able to accomplish what is both necessary and essential for the organisation's future health and success.

Since it is the organisation itself that is most likely to be impacted, for better or for worse, by the outcomes of the strategic relationship, the importance of this relationship cannot be overstated, and its effectiveness will be enhanced if both consultant and client hold some awareness of the underlying complexity of relationship management.

A perusal through the canons of psychological theory, from early Classical Analysis (with which Sigmund Freud is commonly associated) through to Humanism (Eric Berne, Carl Rogers), and latterly to Relational Analysis (Stephen Mitchell), reveals that the phenomenon most frequently identified as the medium of difficulty, learning and healing - and indeed, as the primary vehicle for the vast majority of human activity - is the relationship.

These works emphasise that people are, first and foremost, relational beings. We are born into relationships and as much as we may struggle within them, our psychological survival is threatened without them (Byrd, 1938; Taylor, 1987; Rothblum, 1990; Palinkas, Cravalho and Browner, 1995; all cited in Vaughan and Hogg, 1998), a phenomenon referred to by Lou Cozolino (2006) in his exploration of the neurobiology of human relationships, as 'survival of the connected'.

When John Donne, in the sixteenth century, contended that 'no man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main', he perhaps intended to convey not only the relational quality between human beings, but that our very humanness is predicated on our relationship with all of humanity.

Clearly, we cannot escape the inevitability of relationships, whether in our personal, social or professional lives.

3. What are the objectives of the strategic relationship?

Ideally, the strategic relationship unlocks possibility for the organisation leader, the strategic advisor, and for the organisation.

This relationship is most effective when there is an honest and challenging, but also collaborative, partnership between client and consultant. The consultant needs to appreciate the importance of the relationship being a place for building connection, a safe place where issues, uncertainties and dilemmas can be explored. Furthermore, the successful consultant will be attuned to how the relationship may either diminish or exacerbate the client's anxiety, and respond appropriately.

In most respects, the organisation leader controls the strategic relationship, because he/she is in control of the funding required for the payment of the services provided by the strategic advisor. However, the most effective strategic relationships are based on equality, rather than the consultant needing to please the client.

Cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha, wrote about a 'third space' that arises from the relationship itself. Paying attention to the relationship as an entity to be nurtured may unlock a key to success for both the client and the consultant. Bhabha refers to an ambiguous area that develops when two or more cultures (or individuals) interact. He contends that when each party's contribution is considered to have equal value the hierarchical claims of one party's precedence over the other are deemed invalid, thus opening up an 'in-between' space for the creative elaboration of a third, *shared* possibility.

When each participant is able to temporarily 'bracket' his or her preferred belief system, solution or modus operandi, the third space becomes the site of creative potential, where un-thought, unexplored, perhaps unexpected, options may lie.

Working together to nurture the relationship and to expand the third space establishes an evolving, involving process that ensures that all participants, all opinions, and all positions are understood and valued, before decisions are made. Commitment to the third space enables exploration, in new ways, of the organisation and its purpose. It may allow for a review of the business model with fresh eyes, and it may also identify current and future areas of vulnerability and risk, as well as new insight and opportunity. It encourages the parties to engage in effective thinking and planning with creativity, thus hopefully strengthening the organisation and making it more resilient.

4. How does the leader benefit from a strategic relationship?

It is said that as one goes higher up the corporate ladder, the air gets thinner, and so it is harder to breathe. Having the consultant as a partner in a strategic relationship provides the leader as client with some space to receive 'oxygen': a trusted but independent view that emerges through the relationship.

A counter-view may, of course, be relevant, given personality and temperament, which will influence the preference of each organisation leader. Not all leaders feel the same need to work with another party as a strategic advisor. More independent minded and/or introverted leaders may opt for a self-reflective and exploratory process that they choose to tackle by themselves.

5. Relationship complexity

When the relationship focuses on topics where there are underlying tensions or differences, or the consultant acts in a way that is uncomfortable for the leader, there is a necessary opportunity for self-reflection, before backing off, closing down or even terminating the relationship. Opportunities for self-reflection may occur through the recognition of a conflict of interest, the challenges brought about by uncertainty and the emergence of differences between consultant and client.

5.1 Addressing potential conflicts of interest

The temptation for the consultant as strategic advisor is to sell work, but a successful and enduring strategic relationship will be founded on consciousness and collaboration, driven by values where the consultant knows when to say no to the client and explain why, even if the client as organisation leader is ready to buy. The health of the strategic relationship is best gauged by how well the strategic advisor and organisation leader are able to focus on what needs to be done to best serve the organisation in strategic terms.

The consultant needs to watch out for the client expecting the role to change from strategic advisor to surrogate manager, and indeed, for the consultant's own, perhaps inadvertent, slippage into this role. If this change in role does occur with the consent of both parties, then it must also be understood that the nature of the relationship has fundamentally shifted. It is no longer a relationship of equals. The consultant is no longer empowering the client as leader to take ownership of and responsibility for implementation. Rather, the consultant has become the subordinate, performing that task for the client.

5.2 The inherent challenge of uncertainty in the strategic relationship

With strategic relationships, there are unlikely to be obvious outcomes at the outset of an engagement between consultant and client. Even when a gap is identified and a course of action is defined, the primary responsibility is to solve the client's problems so they stay solved and to build capacity so that the client can solve similar problems on their own in the future, and return to an exploration of the other arenas of uncertainty and change. The temptation can be to default into an operational mode, where outcomes are more clear and obvious, and plans are more concrete. If the parties succumb to this *modus operandi*, they are no longer developing a strategic relationship, and the organisation may once again be more vulnerable to future uncertainty.

5.3 Dealing with differences

As in any relationship, the strategic relationship has the potential to evolve smoothly, particularly when the interests of each party support each other, where negotiations are seamless and where the interplay between needs and expertise is mutually beneficial.

However, many relationships inevitably fall well short of such an ideal. It is often the case that in challenging relational scenarios, participants may become impatient or frustrated, which could give rise to a range of behavioural consequences, from dilution of engagement, to blame and judgement, apathy, antipathy, power struggles, or even the termination of the relationship.

Such behavioural phenomena may be evidence of an underlying difference of values, opinions or priorities, accompanied by the client's and/or the consultant's resistance to these differences. Resistance is often an expression of an underlying concern that has not had a voice.

The client may, for example, be feeling vulnerable but not be consciously aware of this underlying fear. As a result, he/she may 'act out' in ways that block progress and cause the relationship to become stuck.

If the relationship is secure enough, based on high levels of trust, the resistance can be named and the client be given the opportunity to express this underlying concern. This deepens the relationship, providing the client with the experience of this consulting relationship as one of genuine support. In addition, the fear/vulnerability is then out in the open and can be dealt with thereby releasing the blockage in progress.

The consultant is also not immune from resistance. He or she may also experience a range of difficult feelings, and may, for example, notice a depletion of energy for, or a de-prioritising of, a client.

While termination of the relationship may, on occasion, turn out to be the most viable option, often – even when the participants feel it to be so – it is not. In fact, it has frequently been argued by psychologists that it is the very imperfections in relationships that lead to opportunities for greater self-understanding and creative potential.

6. What sets the consultant or strategic advisor up for success?

For this third space to be effectively utilised, the consultant's ability to be authentic is a key contributing component. However, being authentic is a high-risk strategy in today's world of work where a culture of control is so prevalent. Authenticity requires the consultant to self-reflect and to confront personal vulnerabilities. This way of being and behaving by the consultant, in relation to

the client, models for the client a different way to engage in relationships and begins to create a safe space where the clients' best thinking can manifest.

The primary challenge for the consultant in the role of strategic advisor is to be aware of the interpersonal dynamics of the relationship as well as the organisational and business requirements. The consultant needs to have a systemic mind-set, remaining focused on these relationship dynamics, and on the business as a whole. This requires an understanding of who all the stakeholders and decision-makers are and where the power lies.

7. How then do both parties maximise the benefits of the strategic relationship? By understanding the underlying behavioural elements of a strategic conversation and developing self awareness

7.1 Why is it important to understand self and behaviour in a strategic relationship?

For the relationship to work three elements must be in place, all underpinned by a mutual trust, namely:

1. Rapport: an empathy and comfort, where the parties like and trust each other. Creating a safe relationship based on high levels of trust is critical for sharing openly.
2. Collaboration: a meeting of minds and a valuing of each other's competence and potential. To create collaborative relationships, equality is the primary driver. The consultant recognises that the client is an expert in his/her field/area and the client recognises that the consultant has expertise that can help to enhance effectiveness.

3. Commitment: a preparedness for both parties to devote the necessary time and energy to work together in order to move forward.

Another way of thinking about these elements is heart, head, and hands, for rapport, collaboration and commitment, respectively. Each party needs to self reflect on these essential elements to confirm that they are sufficiently in place, or to consider what is still needed.

When working strategically, in addressing the uncertain and the unknown, each participant will respond differently, given personality and temperament. The propensity to work and be comfortable within the strategic future dimensions of uncertainty versus certainty, abstract versus concrete, conceptual versus detailed, reflective versus action-orientated, will vary from person to person. Both strategic advisor and organisation leader must be aware of their own personal preferences and those of the others involved in the strategic relationship.

This does not mean that consultant and client do not step into spaces of relative discomfort. Just the opposite: they should do so, but with the added awareness of that discomfort, so as to know how to manage and learn through it more effectively. For true learning/growth/change to take place, there must be discomfort. Learning/growth only takes place when one moves to the edge of their comfort zone. The consultant needs to normalise and welcome the clients' discomfort as part of the process and as an indication of progress.

Understanding behavioural dynamics also helps to:

- a. broaden choices in how to respond to difficult situations
- b. get buy-in and commitment
- c. link to shared values and identity
- d. address areas of friction between people

- e. understand differences between people

7.2 Understand how to engage in a strategic conversation

Turbulent times call for the executive mind-set to be engaged in an ongoing strategic conversation about the future of the organisation. This involves a scanning and evaluating process which identifies changes in both the external environment and the internal environment of the organisation itself, and then an assessment of the gaps between these two environments, that naturally emerge as circumstances change, in terms of possible opportunities or threats, as well as a possible need to refine the organisation's business model. Leaders who are engaged effectively in strategic conversations about the organisation are best placed to reposition the organisation's strategic focus as needed, because they have identified the gaps and prioritised associated actions to realise opportunities and address threats.

7.3 The four stages underpinning a strategic conversation

It must be noted that organisational effectiveness is determined by the quality of a series of related conversations. They are mostly operational in nature, but it is that smaller subset - those conversations that are strategic - which shape the direction of the organisation. With these strategic conversations, there is a critical need to ensure that they take place in the right manner with the right people at the right time.

As considered previously, the strategic conversation can be an internal reflection or it can be a shared process with a trusted other – consultant, colleague or partner. It is a conversation with four essential stages, which can be entered into at any stage, but the leader must be cognisant of the fact that ongoing change necessitates a continual revisiting of the other stages in the conversation.

The key to the strategic conversation is to identify and then prioritise action around alignment gaps. There are always likely to be gaps emerging between the needs and expectations of the external environment, and the capabilities, strategies and responses of the organisation to address these needs and expectations. There are also always likely to be gaps between the future vision and the current reality.

The four stages of a strategic conversation are summarised in Figure One, below.



Figure One

A good starting point is to review the current environment, identified as the first stage in the Strategic Conversation, labelled '**Today**'. Here the focus is on how the current environment influences the needs of customers and external

stakeholders, and how the current organisation capability and strategy addresses these needs.

An alternative starting point is to engage with the organisation's vision, a future orientation that is stage two in the Strategic Conversation, labelled '**Future**', although an initial focus on today's environment is a useful reality check. Stage two invites questions about the future positioning of the organisation, and explores the organisation's aspirations and purpose.

Having engaged with stages one and two, gaps will most likely have emerged, in two categories. First, there are the gaps between the current internal positioning and strategy and the changing needs of the operating environment, and second, there are the gaps between the current state and future aspiration of the organisation.

The '**Options**' stage of the conversation addresses how to address the most important gaps, while at the same time dealing with those opportunities and threats that will position the organisation most effectively for the future.

Stage four of the strategic conversation, '**Actions**', is about implementing strategy. The leader needs to recommend a way forward that considers the internal and external environments and current and possible future realities that are aligned with the vision and the organisation's strategic objectives.

7.4 How to have a strategic conversation

In order to explore this question, it is opportune to introduce some hypotheses about human behaviour.

The keys to success are to be found in working on the interpersonal attributes of curiosity, openness and acceptance, both of self and the other, in all aspects that may be relevant to the conversation, and therefore to the relationship that exists between the consultant and client.

Firstly, the Johari Window, a simple framework for awareness and consciousness, developed in 1955 by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, provides a useful method of reflection for both parties. The objective for both consultant and client is to enlarge the primary windowpane, the 'Arena', as depicted in Figure 2, below, by broadening awareness of self, other, and the nuances of the interpersonal dynamic, which will, in turn, support the relationship itself, and the strategic conversation.

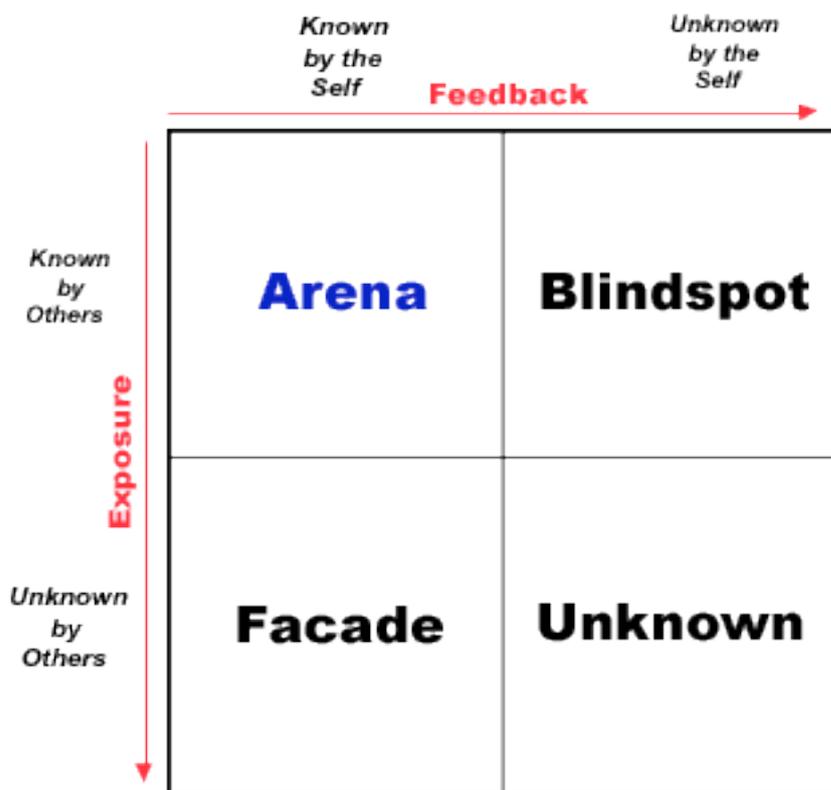


Figure 2

Secondly, it may be helpful to turn to the field of brain-based psychology for some insight into the processes involved in effective communication.

According to this framework, human responses can be understood to arise out of one of three states - engagement, mobilisation and immobilisation.

When humans are calmly engaged in conversation (in other words, when there is no 'trigger', 'button being pushed', emotional or psychological 'charge'), MRI scans of the brain will indicate that the emotional centre, or limbic system, is in a relaxed or 'regulated' state.

When sufficiently provoked (and this differs from person to person, and even from time to time for the same person), the nervous system will stimulate a complex chain reaction and, depending on the severity and meaning of the 'trigger', the limbic system will generate in the individual a 'fight/flight' reaction. A 'fight/flight' reaction is a primitive, mobilising mechanism with an evolutionary function. While the dangers humans experience today may not appear to be as life-threatening as they once were, the processes in our bodies and brains are much the same as when we were Neanderthals, and similar to most other animals.

While a 'fight/flight' reaction may very quickly culminate in the individual literally fighting or fleeing (as in escaping), more often than not, the individual will experience a mild, or more socially acceptable version of fighting or fleeing. Bullying, verbal aggression, criticism, arguing (when a disagreements are accompanied by emotional charge), exercising power over another, or trying to show one's superiority may all be examples of a fight response. Walking out of a meeting in anger or distress, emotional withdrawal (the protective 'wall' many people are familiar with), failure to return a phone call or to follow up as agreed may all be examples of a flight response.

The limbic system, being the body/brain's emotional centre (not the heart, as is commonly believed), is connected, through the autonomic nervous system to the body's organs and muscles (including the heart). With a fight/flight reaction comes a body sensation (such as elevated heart and breathing rates, constriction in the organs, tightness of the muscles, sweatiness), linked to a felt emotion (such as fear, worry, anxiety, frustration, irritation, anger). Importantly, these reactions often occur within a matter of seconds, and most often, within fractions of seconds, and are often without consciousness or awareness. In other words, such reactions frequently fall within blind spots or occur in the 'unknown' pane of the Johari Window.

When emotional triggers are unavailable for conscious reflection because they fall within these blind spots, or are being masked by a façade, or are unknown, they may contaminate the process or the relationship, without the parties necessarily knowing why. This is where resistance could kick in. The brain-based model explains that a natural human response to this situation would be to find oneself being mobilised into fight or flight action which is likely to have a negative impact on the other party, and which may therefore compromise the strategic relationship.

During challenging interactions, individuals predictably react by blaming self and/or the other. But people do not thrive under the weight of this tendency, even though there may be some personal gratification in the form of self-righteous indignation or a sense of superiority, born out of the conflict dynamic. Clearly, it becomes more difficult to think effectively when these reactions occur.

8. So, what can be done?

An alternative and more helpful approach may be to pause the escalation of one's own reactivity and reflect (either alone, or with a trusted colleague) as to what, in *oneself*, may be being evoked by the other. Does it seem, for example, that our

expertise is being doubted, our authority challenged, our judgement questioned? And if so, why is this disturbing to one's equilibrium? The consultant should also ask 'what is my contribution to the thing that I am complaining about?'

Having an effective strategic conversation therefore requires the ability to self-reflect and to regulate emotions. The responsibility to manage this aspect of the relationship often lies with the consultant - although it is ideally a responsibility shared equally with the client. This requires an awareness of possible limbic system triggers in both participants, and an attempt to create a sense of safety so that clear thinking within the context of the conversation can continue effectively.

Naming resistance, firstly, and working with it, secondly, either by providing support to the client or obtaining support from a colleague for oneself, will help to expand the 'Arena' quadrant of the Johari Window, strengthen the relationship and thereby free up the process to enable heightened attentiveness, deeper collaboration, greater trust and more effective problem-solving.

When the parties are sufficiently self-aware to identify a resistance within the relationship, and why they feel provoked (or 'triggered' or that their 'buttons had been pushed'), when the parties are able to apply an emotional 'pause button' (ref, Leigh, 2013) or imagined 'brackets' around their personal responses, when they possess sufficient resilience to calm themselves down and re-enter a state of relaxed engagement, so that the conversation can accommodate, rather than obliterate, the differences that emerge, they are more able to expand the 'Arena' and open and extend the conversation to include the third space, the relationship itself, with all its potential. Such a process of personal reflection requires honesty, courage and time. It will, however, not only be invariably be self-revelatory, but will help to enhance the strategic relationship, foster mutual commitment, engender creative problem solving and ultimately, support the development of the organisation.

Conclusion

Robust, functioning strategic relationships between client and consultant are clearly important for organisations. The participants in these relationships need to have a capacity for self-reflection, as well as an ability to establish sufficient rapport, collaboration and commitment with the other participants. An awareness of the relationship itself as a central additional entity can also make a significant contribution to the success of the strategic relationship.

At the heart of the strategic relationship is an ongoing strategic conversation. This conversation applies, where appropriate, the various models, tools and frameworks of strategy and related fields to consider the future and unknown, to simplify complex questions, to prioritise actions and decisions, and to set a course forward to a relevant and sustainable future for the organisation.

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