COMPLEXITY, CONTRACTORS & CONSULTANTS.

When is outsourcing appropriate?

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Many of us engaged in humanitarian action, conflict management & peace work, human rights, development, state formation and governance improvement, use or are consultants and advisers. Generally speaking however, there is a very monochrome or one-dimensional understanding of ‘advisers’ and ‘consultants’. Here are three key attention points to introduce more nuance and enrich the advisory or consulting relationship.

1. Differentiate Between a Contractor and a Consultant.

When we see our engagement as ‘implementing a project’, the task appears ‘complicated’. When however our objective is to catalyse positive change, particularly in volatile and even violent environments, and with a multitude of actors with a high degree of autonomy, the situation and task usually becomes ‘complex’.

Insights and approaches to ‘complexity’ have been articulated in different quarters, for example the FSG group or Matt Andrews & others who advocate for ‘problem driven iterative adaptation’. Snowden’s Cynefin framework offers one quick way of grasping the important differences in the consulting relationship.

It differentiates between four broad ‘types’ of situation: simple, complicated, complex and chaotic. The key difference lies in what we understand about the relationship between ‘cause’ and ‘effect’. Is it fairly straightforward (simple), is it multi-layered but still understandable by
experts (complicated), or is it only perceivable retrospectively (complex) or not identifiable at all (chaotic)?

Outsourcing a task is generally appropriate in situations that are ‘simple’ or ‘complicated’. You need a dam built and the irrigation canal system extended; you need a new flow design to better manage the traffic in your city; you need national identity papers that are very hard to falsify. None of this is simple, but there are (teams of) experts who can deliver on such complicated tasks. For 17 years construction teams tunnelled away from both sides on the 57 km long Gotthard tunnel in Switzerland. When the two sides met under the mountains, their respective tunnels matched almost perfectly. Very complicated indeed, but not with our current expertise in precision engineering.

Compare this with the much more modest ‘successes’ in e.g. overcoming ethnic divisions in Kosovo, building effective institutions in ‘fragile’ states, or reforming the welfare state in countries with ageing populations. Contrary to what we are made to believe when we have to write detailed proposals and work plans and what we ourselves may be telling the donors and the public, for such complex situations and challenges, we don’t have a ‘best practice’ roadmap that works in most contexts. Catalysing socio-political change is not a technical problem.

What is ‘complicated’ can quickly become ‘complex’: Introduce land right issues and development-induced displacement dynamics into your dam project, and you have corrosive acid into your precision engineering. Mix up the issue of who is entitled to citizenship with the national ID document, and in many countries you have a recipe for trouble.

Short of very authoritarian approaches, fairly generic solutions will not ‘resolve’ complex problems. From ‘Grand Design’ we will have to shift to ‘Location, Location, Location’, and discover the approaches that fit best in particular contexts. Rather than simply ‘implementing’ the ‘plan’, to achieve our higher strategic objectives our practice will have to be one of ‘probing’, of trying and testing, with quick feedback loops about what effects our actions seem to produce and what other factors also affect the situation. And then adjust and adapt. As we move along, we partially discover, but partially also create the ‘pathway’. We may have some good principles for practice but our actual practice will be ‘emerging’.

There is a, probably prevailing, school of thought that argues that the right approach to complex situations is to break the problem down into more manageable chunks, and work on those. The assumptions are that sub-sets of problems have a relative independence and that the cumulative effect of many sub-problems solved will add up to the significant change in the overarching problem. We therefore have created a large number of ‘specialist profiles’ for this, also in the consultancy world. Their work is relevant and helpful. But did the cumulative input of thousands of expert advisers and consultants in Iraq ‘add up’?

On the other hand, we have the ‘systems thinkers’, who take a holistic view and hold that we cannot ignore that different factors and different levels are actually interconnected, and that more systemic (i.e. more sustainable) change will not happen if we only work on parts of it. That awareness is gradually seeping in, with new language e.g. references to the ‘eco-system’. From that perspective, bringing in a specialist to review your organisational finance systems and bring them up-to-standard might be a sensible move – but doesn’t add up to ‘organisational development’. A broader OD perspective would consider for example how finance procedures relate to human resources and programming, and whether they are actually enabling or constraining. A real OD resource person must be a systems-thinker.

The prevailing expectation of consultancy reports is that they present preferably actionable recommendations. This is appropriate for those tasks or challenges that are ‘complicated’ and for which there is genuine expertise. But at the more strategic level, and for situations with a
high degree of complexity, no outsider will have the fail-free solution for you. Most restructuring processes, even accompanied by expensive management consultants, go awry, create much grief and often don’t deliver on the expectations. In contexts with a multitude of semi-autonomous actors, ‘solutions’ in any case will have to be negotiated. So while it may be quite clear which courses of action are unlikely to work, there can be no certainty over which ones will guarantee results.

What are some of the implications?

- Understand where you need ‘technical’ and where you need ‘strategic’ advice, and what sort of experience and personality enables the latter. Broad comparative experience; an excellent ability to grasp the specifics of a context, with its own history, values and multi-actor dynamics, and to look at it from different angles and perspectives; a fair degree of comfort with uncertainty; an ability to ask probing and catalytic questions and to zoom in and out between the relevant detail and the bigger landscape, are all relevant characteristics of a consultant adviser in complex situations.
- Where you need strategic analysis and advice, do not fully outsource the task as if to a contractor, but explore and learn together with the consultant. Focus on the ‘findings’ and the ‘new questions’ of the joint inquiry, and don’t jump hastily to overly confident ‘recommendations’.

2. Consider What Role(s) an Adviser/Consultant Could Usefully Play

How many Terms of Reference include attention to possible roles? Already in 1990 Champion, Kiel & McLendon framed the different roles that consultants, advisers and change agents can play in a 9-grid model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Mentor</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You do it. I will be your sounding board.”</td>
<td>“You did well. You can add this next time.”</td>
<td>“We will do it together and learn from each other.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Trainer/Teacher</td>
<td>Modeler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You do it. I will attend to the process.”</td>
<td>“Here are principles you can use to solve problems of this type.”</td>
<td>“I will do it. You watch so you can learn from me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Observer</td>
<td>Technical Expert</td>
<td>Hands-on Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You do it. I will watch and tell you what I see and hear.”</td>
<td>“I will answer your questions as you go along.”</td>
<td>“I will do it for you. I will tell you what to do.”</td>
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With an X axis that focuses on results and a Y-axis that focuses on capacity-development, we can see how the outsourcing approach comes in the bottom-right corner. You expect your contractor to do the job for you, to provide you with solutions. The role-opposite in this grid is the coaching role in the top-left corner. A coach guides your inquiry and discovery with little...
more than stimulating questions. A joint inquiry and learning process between you and your consultant is going to play out in the spheres of **modelling**, **partnering**, **training/teaching** and **mentoring**. Your consultant may bring much experience, but doesn’t pretend to have the success-recipe for this particular context. You probe together for what might be a good fit ‘solution’ for a particular situation. (From a return-on-investment perspective, this is actually a better-value approach, as you learn beyond the timeframe of the consultancy.)

Very experienced consultants (rather than ‘technical experts’) know that they are likely to play different roles in the course of an assignment, sometimes within the span of the same day. They have invested in personal and professional development, so they are comfortable playing most of them and can discern which one might be situationally most appropriate.

3. **Expect Different Types of ‘Advice’**.

The prevailing expectation is for consultants to make ‘recommendations’. There is generally little thought and appreciation for what can be very different types of ‘recommendations’. Too often they are phrased as ‘X should do this or that’. Not only is the paternalistic tone of ‘should’ not so helpful. More importantly, there is an implication of confidence here that may be overstated.

At least four different types of advice or ‘recommendation’ are possible. Each can be appropriate, but the appropriateness depends on the type of situation and challenge under consideration!

- **Solution**: A specific advice that will solve your problem. Appropriate for ‘simple’ situations, but usually not elsewhere. As I learned from a colleague who had himself been a military adviser to the Afghan army: different countries had their own advisers helping to build the Afghan national army. Each of them was actually replicating their own national model as the ‘solution’ – no one was building an ‘Afghan’ army, fit for the specific challenges and context of Afghanistan and its region.

- **Options**: Political advisers are trained to provide their principals with options – three is a preferred number. Experts helping you with complicated problems will also offer you options: there are usually different choices that provide an ‘good enough’ solution. Appropriate for complicated situations and challenges. Problematic for complex situations when taken, not as ideas to test out, but as different ‘turn-key’ solutions of which you choose one. What do the political processes over Syria and Libya most look like: the pursuit of a chosen solution or muddling through?

- **Ideas**: Nobody can rightfully claim to be very confident about what will work in a particular complex situation. But your consultant can offer you a set of ideas – some of them from other contexts where people had to deal with similar challenges – but just for inspiration, not to copy. Others can be out-of-the box ideas, that challenge core assumptions on which your action was based. The only way to find out what may work in your particular context however is ‘try, test, learn, adapt’. Emerging practice.

- **Process advice**: What would be a suitable process to identify a contextually appropriate approach that has a fair chance of achieving meaningful progress? One such can be for a multi-stakeholder process. After all, the other types of advice focus solely on the client. But one factor that creates complexity in our type of contexts is the multitude of actors. Typically, no single agency, however well resourced, can resolve the problem alone. There has to be enough convergence among key actors and stakeholders to get broad support for positive change. An appropriate advice may be to run a multi-stakeholder process to get to that point. The subsequent course of action cannot be predetermined: it will emerge from the process.
Let me illustrate this with two examples.

**Case 1:** Together with a team of locals, we spent several weeks on an intensive listening exercise in a place that had gone through a secessionist war but with also a lot of infighting. Through focus group discussions and individual interviews, we gained the perspectives of the local population on a broad set of conflict, peace, security and development related issues. One of the core findings was the strong disconnect and distrust between the population and their autonomous regional administration. The first draft of our report consciously presented the ‘findings’ without recommendations. We wanted particularly the authorities and their international partners to really focus on the findings, and think through themselves what the implications might be for what they could constructively do. The reaction of the authorities was: *Where are the recommendations?* Used as they were to international advisers and consultants presenting them with ‘solutions’, they were not prepared to engage with the findings, but wanted to jump directly to the team’s recommendations. As our participatory inquiry concerned vital issues of violence or peacefulness in the area, my local co-team leader was aghast and told them: ‘We need to stop outsourcing the thinking!’ Yet we couldn’t get attention for the report until we had put in our ‘recommendations from the team’.

**Case 2:** More recently, I was asked to do an evaluation of an organisation’s programme over several years in a MENA country. The small programme team was very reflective but hadn’t gathered much in terms of monitoring data. There was also an expectation that I advise on where the programme should go in the next 2-3 years. Time in country being very limited, I turned the exercise into a strategic review. The report contained some specific recommendations, especially related to ensuring that in future the programme would gather essential monitoring data. Most of it however consisted of showing where and why the programme had now developed to such a point that, in different aspects, it was now facing a strategic crossroads, and identifying some of the possible choices the agency could make, with some reflection around each. No recommendations were offered however on what choices the agency should make. For three reasons: While I had learned a lot, I knew that there certainly were important elements that I hadn’t picked up in the short time available. Secondly, different considerations would have to be weighed against each other, and any choice would involve trade-offs. That was the responsibility of the agency, not of the consultant. Because, thirdly, the agency would have to live with the consequences of its choices, not the consultant. In this case, the paucity of firm recommendations was not seen as a problem. Rather the reasoning behind presenting primarily ‘reflection and discussion points’ was well understood and appreciated.

**In conclusion:** Decades of experience should have told us that many situations we thought to be ‘complicated’ are actually ‘complex’. But we still plan as if they were ‘complicated’ and hire outside ‘experts’ with the general assumption that they can provide us workable solutions. Fortunately, the now very rapid pace of change in the world is helping us realise that our old approaches may not be the most appropriate and that nobody has confident ‘answers’. The broader use of ‘hackathons’ and ‘crowd thinking’, creative formats to try and find new ideas and approaches to seemingly intractable problems, are a manifestation of this.

So when looking for external support, consider the nature of the situation and the challenge you want support for. Hire experts for what is ‘complicated’ but ‘strategic advisers’ for what is complex, and consider what role(s) the latter can usefully play and what types of advice you might get from them. You can outsource to the first, but inquire and think together with the latter.