Chapter 3. A sense of consultancy. The Humanising effort of problematisation.

Martijn Simons

Introduction

After the prosperity of consultancy in the 1990's and early 2000's, the booming days of consultancy are behind us. The unclear and cluttered field of consultancy has become a jungle of companies providing advice from every area of expertise. Use Google (one of the most used and commonly known consultants of our time) and you will find IT-consultancy, Creative Consultancy, Employment Consultancy, Management Consultancy, Process Consultancy, Elevator Consultancy, Educational Consultancy and Magic Consultancy. Gilbert Toppin and Fiona Czerniawaska (2005) even consult the field of consultancy by explaining why and how the field of consultancy should change.

All these different consultants have one thing in common. Their focus is on the knowledge and experience used to help the customer or client to solve a problem at hand in order to improve processes, organisations etc. Consultants use knowledge, experience and skills to fix problems. The logic of this systematic, instrumental and impersonal problem solving is most commonly known as the expert logic of consultancy.

This outside-in consultancy is useful when, for instance, my computer or my bicycle breaks down, or when I have a toothache. But the same logic is used for more complex, social and interpersonal problems. The instrumental and impersonal approach of the expert logic has proven to be of little help here. From the attempt of efficient and systematic problem-solving, so called *wicked problems* result: problems resulting from solving problems.

The issue here is that the problem does not carry the same logic as the solution. While the problem is social, interpersonal, complex, moral and human, the solution is analytic, instrumental, systematic, and above all impersonal. This puzzle does not fit. Complex interpersonal problems ask for a vital and dialogical approach. Often, instrumental and single-minded problem solving mutes the humanising voice of the social and dialogical. With a focus on solving problems, consultancy lacks the attention for the problem itself and the social usefulness and humanising effect of problematisation. This humanising effect can be derived from the core and roots of consultancy, *consultare;* to discuss.

This article will argue that problems are worth problematizing. Problematisation is valuable in organisations in terms of learning processes and interpersonal relations. Therefore problems are very important for consultancy and humanisation in organisations. The central question in this article is*: How can consultants use an effective humanising approach to help organisations to engage with problems?*

The process of problematisation moves from an outside-in logic of problem solving towards an inside-out emerging of knowledge from the problem itself. The focus moves from technical managerial expert knowledge to the humanising value of dialogue, sense making and the interpersonal emergence of knowledge through problematisation. A dialogical process that contributes to what Kaulingfreks calls *the creation of human value within the organisation*[1], born from (moral) sensibility and discussion in search of humanisation. We no more believe our words and trust the answers, than start asking questions, listen and enter into open dialogue beyond goals and targets. The process of problematisation has become a search for meaning and sense in organisations.

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[1] See the chapter *Let's dance* by Kaulingfreks in this book

The search of this Chapter starts at an abstract level with social and philosophical theories advocating problematisation as a vital process in organisations. These theories focus on interactive learning and emerging knowledge through problematisation. From this abstract level we move to practices in which inexperienced young professionals are confronted with organisational social issues. Their lack of experience, the questions they raise and their openness towards the issue are valuable as an intervention born from doing justice to the problem at hand.

Problem solving

Since the introduction of scientific management by Frederick Taylor in the early 1900's, science and management are closely intertwined. In the introduction of *The principles of Scientific Management* (1911) Taylor points out three main goals of his book. He wants to show that inefficiency is a problem from which organisations are suffering, that systematic management is a remedy for this inefficiency, and that management is a true science. This direct link between science and management leads to an approach in which organisational processes rest upon laws, rules and principles that can be rationally analysed and improved. In scientific management, also known as Taylorism, the efficiency of organisational processes is a rational mechanism that can be adjusted by measuring and reconstructing the process in order to get objective production standards. Organisational processes become assembly lines, a system of standardisation, synchronisation and specialisation serving production. The first management consultancies therefore were by nature very analytical and technical.

Although a lot has changed since the introduction of scientific management, the core ideas of efficiency and the focus on rationality, measurement and instrumentality still stands strong. The consequence of this focus is that the process of organisation as an interpersonal and human activity is highly undervalued. Even new popular management consultancy

methods that are supposed to be dialogical and human centred, such as 'lean' and 'lean six sigma', are highly affected with analytical and instrumental approach to organisational processes and scientific management. Although 'lean' appears to focus on the involvement of employees, this involvement has a highly instrumental character. The main goal of lean processes is to solve a problem by reducing waste and by continuous improvement of the process. The highest state of organisation processes is flow that can be reached by discovering defects and errors and removing them in order to reduce variations in the organisational process. De facto there are not so many differences between Taylor's assembly line and the flow in the 'Lean'[2] approach. Problems are a hiccup in the flow or the assembly line, which can be overcome by analysing the problem, measuring and quantifying it (for instance the hours spent and the amount of manual actions) and repairing the defects and errors.

When organisational problems are most of all regarded as technical hiccups in organisational processes, it means that consultancy solves organisational problems by overcoming these technical hiccups. This means that a consultant is first and foremost an expert who knows how to fix a certain organisational problem. The consultant appears to be no part of the organisational process; she or he only has to know the problem. The consultant analyses, measures and repairs the problem. Solving an organisational problem is quite often regarded as an objective and instrumental intervention, which I characterise as the expert logic. In this logic, solving organisational problems is an activity on the same level as the reparation of my computer or solving a toothache. Consultancy with its preoccupation with the objective and the instrumental that derives from efficient and systematic problem solving,

[2] Moreover, both Lean approach and Taylorism base their ideas in the context of car producing production lines. Lean methodology originated in the Toyota company, while Taylorism originated in Henry Ford's production of the T-Ford. See: Taylor (1997); Ohno (1988); Chiarini (2012a; 2012b); Womack and Jones (2003); Liker (2007)

reduces problems that are vital, complex and interpersonal in organisations. However, this instrumental and impersonal approach has proven to be of little help. For instance because new problems result from solving problems by reducing the complexity of the problem (Churchman 1967, Rittel and Webber, 1973), because the logic of the solution does not fit the logic of the problem (Beer and Nohria, 2000) or because social problems are not always logic and discursive (Chia, 1996) but also existential and ethical (Kunneman, 2006).

Social and human interactions in organisations are an important part of organisational processes but are highly undervalued in consultancy. Mostly social interaction in organisations is regarded as the soft side and is only of value as a means toward an end. Human interactions are cogs in a large machinery that can be set and repaired. We see this line of thought in 'Lean' consultancy in which human interaction is reduced to time spent or movements made in the organisation process. The employees involved are mainly seen as experts who know how many movements must be made in order for normal processes to work or in order to function as a part of support for implementation.

In one of my last years in college I encountered consultants with such an expert approach. In those years I had a part time job as a receptionist for about eight to ten hours per week in a fairly small academic institution. I liked my job because I encountered very different people, learned something about the organisation I worked for, and tried to be of service where and whenever I could. In the context of a large reorganisation within this organisation, I received a form with a chart of all my activities: receiving e-mail, answering e-mail, opening the door, making calls, receiving people etc. The question of the consultant, which I never saw in person, was if I could express all my activities in hours spent and fulltime equivalent. I became a full-time equivalent (fte), what I did became fte. The value of my job was reduced to a number. As a student in critical organisations and intervention

studies, learning a lot about humanisation in organisations and human dignity in organisations, I refused to be a cog in the machine.

Of course it is important to note that technical solutions are a perfect fit for technical problems. But reducing complex social interaction – and most social issues in organisations are far beyond making calls and receiving people – to a problem that can be solved by impersonal, instrumental and technical means, only leads to new problems. These are so called *wicked problems*: problems resulting from solving problems. The main issue here is that the problem does not carry the same logic as the solution. While the problem is social, interpersonal, complex, moral and human, the solution is analytic, instrumental, systematic, and above all impersonal. With a focus on instrumentally solving the problem, expert consultancy lacks the attention for the problem itself and the social and humanising effect of problematisation. This humanising effect can be derived from the core and roots of consultancy, *consultare;* to discuss.

Problematisation

In order to get to an approach to consultancy and problem-solving that has eye for humanisation in organisations, we have to prioritize the social aspect of problems in organisations and the way it can foster knowledge that helps to solve an organisational problem from the inside out. A humanising perspective on problem-solving reflects the social problems in organisations. Management theory in general lacks an adequate discussion of these social problems. By gathering sensible and social concepts, a focus on humanisation gives us new concepts, insights and skills in order to discover the nature of social problems in organisations.

Therefore we have to respect what I call problematisation in organisations. Instead of jumping into solutions, most problems are worth problematizing because of the learning

processes, emerging knowledge and interpersonal relations involved. This makes

problematisation one of the most humanising activities in organisations. To get a better

understanding of problematisation in organisations, we have to get to what Burrell calls 'the

absent centre of management theory': philosophy[3] (Burrell 1989). Usually, philosophy is

associated with abstract ideas, difficult books and bearded old men. While this is all too true,

philosophy can also be concrete and practical in its application which helps us to re-think and

re-animate organisational practices. One of the most inspiring philosophers to re-think our

everyday life in organisations is the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995). With his

focus on on-going event of relational processes, he makes way for vital perspectives on social

interactions in organisations.[4] An intensification of the attention for vital perspectives on

social interactions can be seen in Deleuzian interpretations in organisation- and social studies.

The Deleuzian focus on the innovative and *interplex* processes of organisation are extensively

discussed by organisation theorists like Stephen Linstead, Michael Pedersen and Bent Meier

Sørensen.

Instead of regarding organisations as a mechanic and technical system, Deleuzian

philosophy regards organisations as continuous creative and relational flows in which the *elan

vital* of organisations is emphasized. Organisations continuously change in everyday

practices. Although organisational processes are quite often seen as a repetition of work, as

Ford did when he regarded organisational processes as an assembly line, organisational

processes actually get shaped in the way people 'reply to each other' (cf. Linstead, 2002, p.95

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[3] Gibson Burrell points at the absence of philosophy in standard Management Theory which

he indicates as *Heathrow Organisation Theory*: the management books available at most

airport bookshops

[4] See for instance: Fuglsang, M. and B.M. Sørensen (ed.) (2006); Sørensen, B.M. (2003;

2004; 2005); Pedersen, M. (2008); Kristensen, A.R., Pedersen, M. and Spoelstra, S. (2008).

and further). The actualisation of organisational processes emerges from a composition of new and repetitive actions. Organisational processes are what Deleuze calls assemblages[5] of the repetitive plane of organisation (the world as we know it) through planes of immanence (an intensively dynamic state) towards new planes of organisational processes. These continuous dynamics between repetition and change are the creative forces of the organisation[6].

One of the events in which we can see this vital process is problematisation. That is in not trying to solve it but to stay in the problem, to discuss it, to live it through. In more philosophical terms: '[T]o push problem towards a liminal crisis between a deterritorialization and possible reterritorializations, that is, to push it into a critical passage. Organisation theory should be exactly that: an elaborately developed question, rather than a resolution to a problem, an elaboration to the very end, of the necessary implications of a formulated question. (...) It is time for you to enter into your crisis and find a problem worth problematising.' (Sørensen, 2005, p.131) (cf. Fuglsang and Sørensen. In: Fuglsang and Sørensen (ed.), 2006, p.16).

Digging deeper into the problem at hand entails a deeper understanding of the situation from which knowledge and solutions emerge and can be discussed. Instead of finding an external body of knowledge in the expert logic, solving problems emerges from the interpersonal logic of sense and dialogue. Instead of detaching ourselves from the problem by

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[5] Cf. De Landa (2006); Patton (2006)

[6] Deleuze calls this the dynamics of deterritorialisation and reterritorialization that set connections free in order to create new connections and thus creates new organisational processes.

solving[7] it from outside-in, it is more important to relate to the problem at hand. Instead of saving time and solving a problem, we have to take time to live the problem. In contrast to what lean methodology wants us to believe. We have to waste time to solve problems, because organising takes time.

Taking time and solving problems

One of the main characteristics of problematisation is that we have to take our time to relate to the problematic situation at hand. It is what philosopher Henri Bergson describes as an intuitive process or a process of intellectual sympathy. Intellectual sympathy starts from the idea that there is a direct, strong and vital relation between human beings and their contextual setting. Starting point in the relation is contact with progress, which Bergson calls duration. This is the qualitative and direct relation we have to the processes of everyday life (for instance in organisations)[8]. In Bergson's philosophy taking time for human interaction is most important for knowledge creation, because knowledge about (organisational) progress emerges from progress itself. Knowledge born from progress itself produces custom-made knowledge instead of general, ready-made understanding of the world. Knowledge is not

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[7] To solve comes from the Latin word *Solvere* which means to detach / to disconnect or to redeem/ to save.

[8] Notice that Bergson's conception of progress as duration is very different from the standard conception of progress as a process of getting better, stronger, faster etc. In Dutch this difference becomes visible in the difference between *voortgang* (progress as a process in time) and *vooruitgang* (progress as improvement).

static, but vital, changeful and creative in its application. Knowledge is not something that exists detached from reality, but is deeply intertwined with life. (cf. Styhre, 2003[9]; 2004)

With regard to outside-in problem solving in organisations, this means that the analytical, scientific knowledge about how an organisation should work takes precedence over everyday life in organisations. Bergson calls this instrumental and mechanic approach to everyday life the *cinematographic tendency* of the intellect. Our intellectual capacity enables us to approach reality *as if* it is a chain of immobile moments or parts representing the continuity of life through time *(Duration)*(Bergson, 1998; 2001; 2004). We can see this for instance in protocols which are not everyday life in organisation but pretend to represent and dictate life in organisations. Nurses *know* what they have to do in which amount of time, they know which steps they have to take to care before they even have seen a patient. If I have problems with the behaviour of my colleague, complaining or solving the problem is organised in different steps of the protocol. This kind of cinematographic organisation of everyday life in organisations detaches us from the actual experience of taking care or being upset with someone. If we want to understand what it is to take care, to be upset or to solve organisational problems, we should do more justice to everyday vital, practical and

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[9] Styhre states that in 'much of the knowledge management literature, knowledge is invoked as a fixed body of knowledge that can be employed for the benefit of the organization. A root metaphor for this view of knowledge is that knowledge is a stock of knowledge at hand, ready to use (…)' In Bergson's view knowledge is never a stock, a fixed set of capabilities, skills or resources that can be used like any tangible resource. Knowledge is instead processual, evolving and continually changing when put into practice.' (Styhre, 2003, p.23)

professional knowledge in organisations.[10] To understand life in organisations a vital professional knowing is needed that sympathizes with on-going reality that creates an ordination of knowledge. It is knowledge that continuously organises itself from the inside out, it is continuous knowledge in progress that is both change and repetition. It becomes a continuous creative act of affirmation and discussion of existing protocols and ordination of knowledge. This challenges the expert approach of problem solving in organisations. The obviousness of intellectual and scientific knowledge is put at stake in a Bergsonian approach.[11] Scientific truth claims about organisational processes are challenged by sympathetic knowledge in organisations.

This means that problem solving through problematisation demands direct contact with the problem as a living reality (*elan vital*). In problematisation, people involve themselves in the joint venture of the organisational problem *and* they are involved with each other. This means that problematisation is a continuous creative process in which solving a problem is an emergent, spontaneous and relational activity. Solving problems emerges from everyday life in organisations as different sympathetic relations. Intellectual sympathy therefore indicates a living ethical and personal relation of connectedness in diversity. This is a perspective that has a better connection with social problems in organisation and shows characteristics of humanisation as part of problem solving in organisations.

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[10] For a deeper understanding of the cinematographical as a timeless representation of organisation that gets precedence over the everyday process of organizing see: Scott Ruse, 2002; Olma, 2007; Purser and Petranker, 2005; Linstead, 2002; Thanem and Linstead, 2006; Calori, 2002)

[11] Cf. Gaffney, 2006, p.87 and further, where he discusses the impact of Bergson's critical ideas about scientific knowledge and its relation to Deleuzian philosophy

A sense of consultancy

After showing the dehumanising effects of the mechanical outside-in approach of expert consultancy, and considering the interpersonal involvement with the organisational process the real expertise, the question arises if there is any room left for consultancy. Does consultancy still make sense? It does. As long as it has a sense of *consultare;* discussion, personal interaction and making organisations sensitive to what is happening and at stake. This means that the consultant is conscious of the core of his own work, to discuss, and the consultant as a person comes into play. Consultancy, then, becomes a personal attitude stimulating problem solving instead of being the one to solve the problem. In order to discuss organisational problems consultancy is born from using senses and questioning common sense. It does not start with pre-existing ideas and models as a solution, but arrives at them. For consultancy to make sense, it has to unfold knowledge.

A better understanding of this kind of consultancy I received, paradoxically, from young professionals who are not (yet) consultants, working on a project called *Kickstart your Social Impact*[12]. In this project we help highly educated young professionals who can't find a job directly after college. In interdisciplinary teams they work as starting consultants with complex organisational problems. We coach and train the young professionals to cope with this new experience of working in an organisation and working as a consultant.

What I noticed while coaching these teams was that it doesn't help the organisations much to make a model to solve the problem, a comprehensive project plan or write reports with the 'right' answer to the problem at hand and that tells them what they have to do to solve the problem. Most of these young professionals have never even used management

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[12] http://www.kickstartyoursocialimpact.nl/

models to solve problems nor written a comprehensive project plan for organisational problem solving. They actually *don't know* the answers to organisational problems, and they do not have the experience yet.

What they *can* do, and what helps the organisations most, is talking and listening to people and asking 'stupid' but critical questions, using their (common) sense to discover the problem at hand or to discover the interests of different stakeholders. They are naïve, intuitive and sympathetic in their interpersonal approach. Emerging from this curious and wondering attitude is a process of problematisation. Key to this emerging problematisation are their intended or unintended critical questions and actions. *Because* they are no part of the organisation, *because* they are no experts, but because they relate to the problem at hand they create new insights, narratives and ways of working from which new knowledge and action unfolds. In this sense, consultancy becomes an attitude of curiosity and interest, of knowing and questioning which is very different from the attitude of the expert-consultant that has knowledge on forehand and answers in advance.

One of the teams of young professionals worked on a project at one of the largest banks in the Netherlands. The central question they worked with was how the bank could get customers with a mortgage at the bank interested in sustainability, for instance in solar collectors or improvement of the isolation. Talking with different stakeholders, the team discovered that the decision makers at the bank thought it was useful to aim at sustainability but didn't know exactly why. Throughout the organisation there were very different perspectives on what sustainability means. They gathered all the decision makers and started a dialogue with them about *their* perspectives on sustainability and *their* ideas about the importance of the subject. By asking why they think it is important, they figured out how to translate it into effective and appropriate messages to their customers. During the evaluation of the project, one of the decision makers told me that it was a 'risk' to work with

inexperienced young professionals because they don't know how the organisation works etc. But it was this same 'risk' of which he spoke that had brought him the best insights and had delivered the most results for the project. The 'consultants' had helped to unfold these insights because of their fundamental questions and it was because of their talking with people apart from their position within the organisation that they were as effective as they were inexperienced.

Other examples were the *reception experience project* and consulting a professional sports club that wanted to help youngsters suffering a lack of exercise. The team working on the reception experience project observed the interactions and talked to different employees of the organisation and users of the building, but most of all they used themselves as tools of experience. What happens when I step out of the bus and can't find the building while it's right in front of me? What bothers me most? By observing, talking and using their own experience, the team started to undertake actions to improve the reception experience.

The sports club had sport fields available for youngsters that are suffering from a lack of exercise. Talking to the youngsters and the organisation, the team discovered first of all that the youngsters didn't see themselves as 'suffering' from a lack of exercise. Secondly it appeared the fields were only available for use during school hours. After school members of the sports club occupy all fields. Common sense was applied here, and it lead the team back to the organisation to talk about a more a positive approach to the youngsters, for example by stimulating a healthy lifestyle, and about considering to cooperate with schools in this project because the schools can gather and mobilize the youngsters at times when the sports fields are available. The sports club simply had not considered this option before. By using their senses and their common sense these teams of young professionals stimulated new perspectives and solutions emerging from vital interaction with the organisation and stakeholders.

By living consultancy, these young professionals are in search for living knowledge and living solutions that are often both simple and effective. By being the 'Socrates' of the organisational problem they pass the 'common sense' of the organisation to get to a para-sense[13] of the problem by problematizing the known and the self-evident. They innovate from interpersonal relations and by stimulating new interpersonal relations. They discuss or stimulate discussions like true consultants and (co-)create solutions nobody, including themselves, expected on forehand.

The humanising effort of consultancy

Now, what can we learn from the young professionals that live consultancy? In the examples we see that different stakeholders open up to learn from the problem at hand. The profession of consultancy consists of creating and stimulating a sensibility for problems by opening up a dialogue and asking questions. In this process of questioning and discussing, different stakeholders gather around the problem at hand. From this process of problematisation, the reflective turn emerges from experience and discovers[14] both problem and solution.

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[13] Parasense is related to 'paradox': para – beyond, and doxa – opinon, or common sense. Spoelstra regards Parasense as a creative force in organisations. 'Philosophy offers a breath of fresh air that allows us to think or see things differently: A philosophical concept of organisation makes us think and see organisation in ways we hadn't before' (Spoelstra, 2007, p.26).

[14] Here, discovering is not so much an analytical scientific discovery but an phenomenological or existential discovery as described in the work of Martin Heidegger, he

The humanising effort of a consultant is to be in touch with the problem at hand, have feeling for it and the people involved. By intuitively asking questions an open dialogue emerges from which different standpoints and personal relations to the problem evolve. In discovering the problem, solutions are not put forward as forms of expert knowledge by consultants. In the encounter, a multiverse is created around the problem[15] of which all stakeholders are trying to make sense. The interacting universes with their own sets of rules and ways are stimulated to become confused and reorganised by the confrontation. From this 'trembling' experience of not knowing, reflection, and searching for new ways to relate to the problem, new insights emerge as lines of flight.[16]

Instead of solving problems, a consultant takes the time to create an open space for a way out of the problem. The humanising effort of the consultant is to (help to) slow down and live through the problem. Like Socrates[17], described by Henri Bergson, a consultant is never

discusses covering up opposed to discovering (or uncovering) as phenomenological or hermeneutical relational way to gather knowledge.

[15] The problem as such can be regarded as a plenum, an empty space that is filled by multiple perspectives, interpretations and discussion. One could visualize a plenum as a square (*place* (French) or *plein* (Dutch)), the emptiness of the square makes it possible to fill it with perspectives, discussion and meaning.

[16] *Lines of flight* is a Deleuzian concept that is used to indicate 'a way out', which can be fleeing as well as fleeing or leaking or disappearing into the distance (a vanishing point).

[17] 'It seems to me that intuition often behaves in speculative matters like the demon of Socrates in practical life; it is at least in this form that it begins, in this form also that it continues to give the most clear-cut manifestations: it forbids. Faced with currently-accepted ideas, theses which seemed evident, affirmations which had up to that time passed as scientific, it whispers into the philosopher's ear the word: impossible!' (Bergson, 1968, p.129)

satisfied with a final solution, because every solution is temporary and on its way to new problems, challenges and lines of flight. We no longer believe our words and trust the answers, but start asking questions, listen and enter into open dialogue beyond goals and targets.

It is a human search for temporary solutions, steering clear of mechanical outside-in solutions, that help to discover what works. Not by recreating life in static answers and protocols born from an urge for efficiency, goals and targets, but by life itself, the creative force of organisation. By moving and being moved. The humanising task of the consultant is to slow down, be tentative and sensible and to open up a space to search for solutions as lines of flight. This humanising effort of consultants helps to open up for the unexpected by having an eye for what is not yet there; by living in the absence of a final solution.

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