Ten Key Techniques for Process Improvement Consulting in a Challenging Environment©

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When organizations put extreme pressure onto process improvement success, sponsors and change agents have little room to experiment and even less room to fail. Consulting in these environments can feel like a no-win situation, both for the employees and for the consultant. The consultant must discover all objectives and be genuine in responses. The consultant needs to take advantage of his or her position outside of internal politics to tell the truth, both negative and positive. Patience and a willingness to take the heat will go a long way, as will working in pairs and being willing to cease the engagement altogether. This article describes 10 key techniques to handle the difficulties.

Some organizations fear losing a competitive edge when their competitors achieve a high maturity level on a capability model. Therefore, these organizations seek to achieve a similar or higher level on a fast track. Demonstrating a capability model Level 1 attitude, management believes that by pushing individual heroes to work very hard, they can make the impossible happen [1]. Consequently, a software (or systems) engineering process group (SEPG) may request consultants to help meet process improvement goals while dealing with this extreme pressure.

Symptoms of a challenging environment that appear in assessment team members, sponsors, and interviewees include the following:

- Lying to assessors and to themselves about progress.
- Denying that model requirements apply.
- Arguing with an assessor or instructor that certain practices in the model ought not to be considered requirements[1].

In some fast-track process improvement organizations, true improvement is perceived as negative, rather than as the goal. They see the ideal situation as achieving the banner without changing the way work is done.

Other organizations have a difficult culture: Incentives are awarded to individuals, and each employee seeks solely to improve his or her own standing. Executive challenges to work as a team are perceived as patronizing attempts to fool the masses. Managers are told, "Find a way," and that way often involves deceit (e.g., back-pocket schedules) and exhortations to heroism (e.g., extremely long hours *just this once*).

Another challenging environment occurs when management has what employees call a Silver Bullet of the Month [2]. Employees perceive a process improvement effort to be temporary, only to be abandoned as soon as a banner is achieved. This leads to poor engineering of process documentation, which is then unusable, fulfilling the prophecy.

Techniques

Below are ten key techniques consultants can use to help make a process improvement effort successful. The second through fourth techniques are basic consulting techniques that are most critical in a challenging environment.

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1. Be Aware of Explicit and Hidden Agendas

Known objectives are the primary key to success. Most process improvement efforts will explicitly set an objective for a higher capability maturity level, but secondary objectives are often hidden. Consultants who behave as if the explicit objective is all there is are likely to experience resistance or even sabotage when they suggest actions that go against hidden objectives.

Typical secondary objectives include a manager or the SEPG members earning a bonus if the effort succeeds, or being fired if it does not; the organization being able to market at the same level as competitors; and bidding on particular contracts that require a specific maturity level. The authors are also aware of one company that wanted a maturity level because the company was about to be sold. A successful consultant will be aware of these secondary objectives, and will try to meet them, to the extent they are ethical and not in conflict with true improvement.

Internal politics are another kind of hidden agenda. Any true change will modify someone's field of control. If that person perceives this as negative, he or she will fight hard to prevent or reverse the change. It is important to understand who these people are, how hard they are likely to fight back, and how and what can be done about it.

2. Be Authentic

Peter Block, in "Flawless Consulting" [3], discusses the two most important questions[2] consultants should ask themselves. The first, which is most important in a difficult environment, is, "Am I being authentic with this person now?" In addition to requiring truth as described in the next technique, authenticity requires the consultant to understand and express his or her own feelings and hesitations. This includes uncomfortable feelings like, "You are excluding me from the decision-making process," or "I feel I am being seen as a judge on this project, and that is not the best role for me."

Most managers know, but do not say, that they know more than any consultant does about their own particular business. It is refreshing to have the consultant confirm that. The consultant should then explain his or her specific role in the engagement; typically, the role is bringing in a fresh pair of eyes, highlighting risks, and suggesting practices that have worked in other places.

3. Call It Like It Is

In a difficult organizational climate, a consultant has the advantage of being an outsider. An outsider need not bow to internal politics, and can speak the truth that insiders are afraid to say. An outsider cannot be hurt (much) by innuendo and is not required to appear to be a team player. The consultant therefore has a *responsibility* to the client to be truthful, especially when the client may not want to hear the truth. "No, your people are not praising your actions." "No, I do not think this plan is reasonable." "No, I don't think it's a good idea to tell the group a date you think is unreasonable so they'll work harder. They will just get cynical when you slip it again." Sponsors may not act like they appreciate such honesty, but it really is what they pay for.

Asking targeted questions may appear less confrontational than simply stating opinions, yet make the same point. Edgar Schein, in "Process Consultation" [4], suggests questions that focus on the project's goals whenever criteria for decisions become vague or when the group appears to be bypassing consensus. Questions such as, "How will unilateral pronouncements on our part help convince employees that their input is required?" may cause the sponsor to rethink some plans.

4. Support and Encourage

Most clients who hire a consultant are at least a little insecure about their ability to do the work. Especially after the euphoria of starting an effort, when the shock of reality hits, the consultant must reassure the client that this is part of the process; he or she is doing well and will get through it. There is no reason to despair. Specific examples of things that the client did well are welcome, reminding the client that worse things would have happened had the client not intervened. The consultant needs to be quite genuine and preferably specific in the encouragement, but also flexible.

For example, an intelligence agency senior manager asked one of the authors what he should do about emphasizing process improvement after Sept. 11, 2001. The consultant replied that although process improvement all too often is put on hold for fire fighting, there are exceptional times when there is no choice but to let emergencies take over. An organization has to react decisively and quickly, putting strategic efforts like process improvement on hold. The consultant reassured the client that what he was doing was as good as could be expected. The consultant reminded him that the important thing is not to drop process improvement altogether, but deal with the emergencies first and refocus on process improvement later.

5. Repeatedly Reset Expectations

Clients in denial, or clients in a hostile culture, frequently forget what you have told them, particularly when they did not want to hear it in the first place. Consequently, it is important for the consultant to revisit it frequently the expectations he or she has of the organization and the improvement project. For example, "You realize, with this time frame so short, we can't do a pilot before rolling out to the organization? That means the projects may well find major flaws in the documentation that would require a rerelease and a slip in the appraisal. Remember, we talked about this when we made the original plan."

6. Take the Heat

Most process improvement efforts in challenging environments will benefit from agreement between the insiders (say, the SEPG), and the consultants. A smart consultant will team up with internal change agents. If the insiders cannot afford to say something that needs to be said but may be threatening, then the consultant should say it. For example, "Compared to other organizations I have seen, this organization has a lot of duplicity and deceit in its actions, for example …" Then the SEPG can be seen as the *good guys* responding to the bad news. It is more predictive of lasting improvement if the organization perceives the insiders as being helpful.

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7. Double-Team

Having two or more consultants really helps in some situations. Of course the two consultants must plan in advance to be sure to say the same thing, but the advantage is, the story is much more likely to be believed if two different people are saying it. Furthermore, when one is worn down with arguing, the other can take over and provide a break.

Another technique that has worked, even unintentionally, is a variation of the approach known as *good cop/bad cop*. One author naturally tended to be considerate and flexible, but when backed into a corner, could call on her colleague who could be relied upon to come down hard in that situation. "Look, do you want to deal with me or *him*?"

8. Nudge-Nudge-Kick-Repeat

A basic mantra with difficult situations, the *nudge-nudge-kick-repeat* technique uses repeated gentle nudging toward the right answer, with occasional stronger attempts to get attention. The consultant must be extremely patient to continue to nudge as a matter of course.

Nudges are gentle reminders of the right way. A consultant should frequently remind the client of the point of process improvement and the need for buying in. Additionally, a consultant can review the way the effort has occurred to date and suggest different activities that may accomplish goals more easily. Nudges tend to sound like, "Typically clients find that …"

Kicks are more direct. "We told you six months ago to XXX. You said you would. Now you still haven't done anything, and as a result you have created YYY problems, and you're also four months behind schedule. Are you interested in this effort or not?" Note that the more specific the detail in such a statement, the better.

By understanding that the need for continuous nudges and occasional kicks is normal, the consultant can take in stride the number of times this technique needs to be repeated.

9. Document

In some very challenging environments, consultants can run into *process improvement saboteurs*. Intentionally or unintentionally, these people attempt to undo what the consultant recommends. Some take the form of passive-aggressive resistance, namely, appearing to agree and comply but working hard off-line to make sure that the recommendations are not implemented. The authors have also seen instances of internal team members consistently misrepresenting the statements of consultants: "My SEPG team leader tells me you said we wouldn't need to document these things." ("I most certainly did not!") Although it seems defensive and reactive to cover oneself with memorandums, in such cases as consistent misrepresentation the consultant does have to act.

A common technique is for the consultant to write minutes of the meetings that occur and send them to everyone on the team. This way the consultant can be sure everyone has the consultant's exact words. Perhaps a better technique is to have the insiders document the minutes, insisting that they be sent to the consultant for concurrence. This way, the insiders are not only taking charge (and getting practice documenting decisions), but also realizing over time that they need to listen to the consultant's views and accurately represent them, or they will have to keep doing the minutes over and over again.

10. Be Willing and Ready to Bow Out

A consultant's greatest negotiating power comes when he or she is most free to leave the table altogether. In a difficult engagement, feeling able to terminate conveys additional power to compel the client to be reasonable. "I have to follow the assessment rules. If you want to break them, you will need to find a different consultant." Besides, a good consultant does not want his or her name associated with an effort that is so doomed to failure that the most important points cannot be implemented. Always having other work to do allows the consultant to be firm with any particular client.

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Conclusions

There are some stubborn cultures that even excellent consultants cannot affect. Short of impossible situations, however, consultants can use these techniques to encourage clients to do what needs to be done. General support and encouragement go a long way. Truth allows the client to believe that the support is genuine. Truth also provides the client with bad news, sometimes saving face for the insiders. Occasionally, the consultant has to deal with denial more strongly, sometimes by teaming up, and sometimes by fairly direct statements of detailed fact. Finally, the consultant needs to have an alternate plan; it keeps paychecks coming, and makes the consultant's advice more compelling.◆

References

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3. Block, Peter. Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Experience Used. San Diego: Pfeiffer & Company, 1981.
4. Schein, Edgar H. Process Consultation, Volume II: Lessons for Managers and Consultants. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987.

Notes

1. Features of both the Standard CMMI® Appraisal for Process Improvement (SCAMPI℠) and its predecessor, CMM®-Based Assessment for Internal Process Improvement (CBA IPI), were instituted to prevent these symptoms from giving false positive assessments.
2. The second question is, "Am I completing the business of the consulting phase I am in?"

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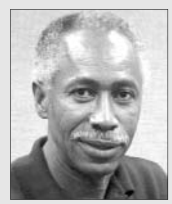

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