Mentoring a New Consultant: One Mentee's Perspective

by Emily Lewis

I am three years into a career as an external organization development consultant. I came into this world of external consulting fresh out of graduate school…wide eyed, text booked-up, and hungry to process consult the world. I was privileged to join a group of seasoned practitioners who truly wanted me to succeed and were willing to give a whole lot to make that happen. By telling my story, I hope to further the practice of OD by bringing attention to a critical need in the OD field - effective mentoring.

Mentoring is not a science. However, here is a formula that was used by my firm which worked to bring me from various shades of green into the full color palate necessary to be an effective consultant.

Watch + Co-do + Be Watched = Readiness

A little preface…

Putting on the right lenses: Before the formula will work it is important to lay the necessary ground work. Having recently emerged from the Bowling Green State University's Masters of Organization Development program, I could understand and speak (sort of) the OD language. I certainly was not fluent…but I was building my toolkit. The methods, models, theories, and business acumen that I built allowed me to hit the ground running…or at least walking. Without the right education, I would have likely approached client situations with the expert lens and without a sense of the emergent, organic nature of change.

Having a conceptual framework in place made for a smooth transition into learning and understanding the actual OD technologies. As a part of my on-boarding I learned the protocols for how our firm does team building, strategic planning, etc. Without the thorough on-boarding to our firm's protocols, I would have likely been slower to understand the steps and how they build on one another to create an environment where change can really happen.

The Formula in Action

Watching: Right out of the chute, I observed a team building intervention. I had

read and discussed the intervention of team building, but I was seeing it in action for the first time. My boss brought me in as a co-consultant. I sat in to observe the interviewing process and how he collated the data. I then watched my boss facilitate the two-day retreat (I did present one topic and intervened a couple of times). My boss and I were continually (before, during, and after) processing what was happening, and why it was happening. He also gave me a ton of room to ask questions. This is also where the vital tool of feedback began. My boss asked me for observations about his techniques and the impact. He also gave me feedback about the pieces that he asked me to take on.

Lessons learned –

- Be patient as you realize that all that great stuff you learned in grad school did not FULLY prepare you to get in the room with the client
- Even if you feel like you have no idea what you're doing…don't be afraid to take on little pieces of a challenging client intervention
- Surround yourself with people who will give you room to ask a million questions

Co-doing: Another early project I was involved in was a leadership effectiveness survey with a local non-profit. The board of directors asked us to develop and disseminate a survey that would help them assess the effectiveness of the two organization co-leaders. Although my colleague was the one who was called, she asked me to collaborate with her from the beginning. Together we contracted, designed and distributed the survey, collated the data, and presented the results to the board. More than half of our time was spent in preparing the survey data and presentation to the board. Although this was my first time presenting to a large board of directors, I felt confident in myself and the data.

Lessons learned –

- Nothing takes the place of being fully prepared – on your own and with your colleague
- Having valid data is critical when delivering "the news"

Being Watched: I developed a three-day facilitation skills workshop for a manufacturing company. When it was ready to deliver to the client, I asked my colleague to watch me and provide feedback. At the end of every each day, we debriefed and she would share her observations. By asking to be watched, I was able to improve my skills as a trainer/facilitator quickly and exponentially.

Lessons learned –

- Don't be afraid to ask for on-going, immediate, informal feedback
- Listen to it…non-defensively and incorporate immediately

Readiness: After three years, I still yearn to watch and collaborate on client

work with my colleagues. However, I feel confident that I am capable as a solo consultant. I have to confess…in the back of my mind I still ask my self, "what would they do?" I hope I never lose that.

A little footnote…

All of the "in the room" work with the client is not possible without a whole lot of preparation. In my first year or two, the prep time necessary to get me ready was probably twice as long as it is for a seasoned practitioner. My colleagues were patient teachers…plus we had a lot of fun role playing and "what-iffing" everything to death.

What my colleagues were willing to give?

- Trust – they believed in me…or at least they believed in the learning process
- Patience – they took the time necessary to help me learn the technologies and get ready for the "real" work
- An opening to the client – they introduced me to the client as an equal
- A co-lead role – they brought me in on a project even if it was a one-consultant job
- A lead role – they let go
- Earnings – on a commission model, they were willing to give of their earnings to keep me afloat
- Feedback – reciprocal openness and honesty allowed for me to "turn the corner" quicker and with more self-awareness

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