

MGSM953 Management Consultancy and Research
Term 2, 2006

WHERE SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE GO TO GO FURTHER



Individual Progress Report

**Personal reflections & learnings
from Group CC's Telco assignment**

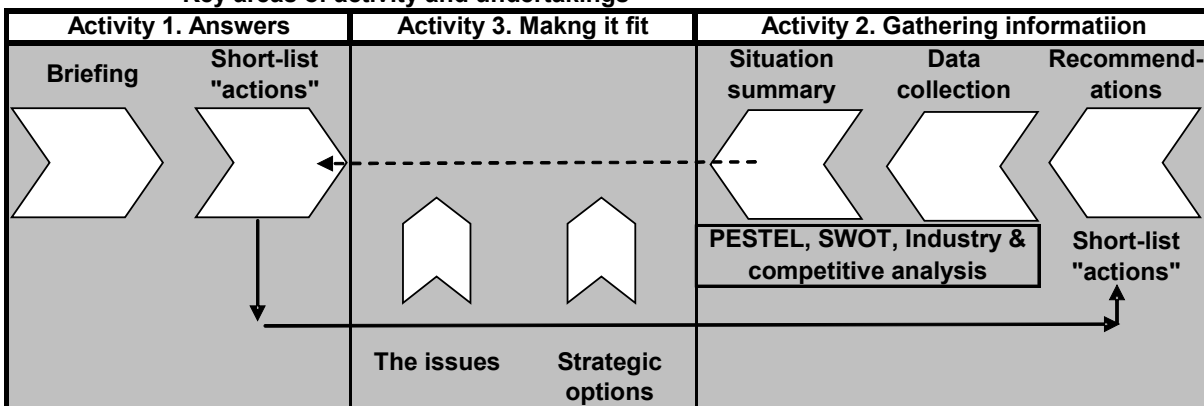
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A good starting point to capture learnings from the group assignment is to identify the actual consulting process that was undertaken, refer Figure 1. The first activity came up with the actions that would form the recommendations to the client to solve its business concerns and issues. Activity two sought to understand the industry in considerable detail in order to draw out support for the recommended actions. The third activity was finding the linkages from the situation summary back to the recommended actions.

This approach and methodology created considerable group conflict and disputes that were never resolved and resulted in compromised outputs. On reflection, activities one & two offered little new information or insight into the business issues for the client. Activity three was considered more a process in justifying the interpretation of the situation with the recommended actions.

Figure 1. The actual consulting process by the group
Key areas of activity and undertakings



On reflection of the above process there were three fundamental learnings that need to be taken on board for future consultancy projects, they are;

1. a need to get activity one right
2. to have a consultancy framework and report structure
3. to acknowledge how difficult it is for a minority to influence the group majority if 1 and 2 are not in place.

The first learning specifically highlights the need not to start the data collection activity until a number of key management consulting considerations have been

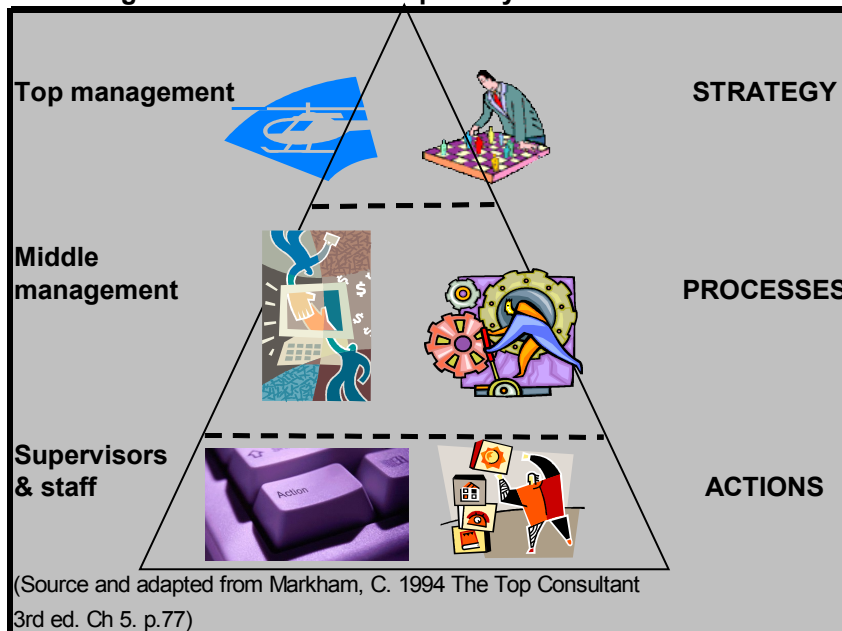
solidified. This part of the process will be referred to as stage 1, 'establish the contract'¹ to differentiate it from the activities undertaken in the group assignment. The primary focus of this reflection will be to consider the appropriate elements for stage one. The aim is to identify those elements and how best to apply them to future management consultancy projects. Discussed are the following five key elements that are essential to getting the project off to a professional start, they are;

- 1 receiving the brief and client empathy
- 2 planning the project and deciding the;
 - i) scope and issue/s
 - ii) level of intervention
 - iii) approach and hypotheses
- 3 The brief, a proposal and agreement

Receiving the brief and client empathy is the first key element for stage 1. While prior knowledge of the fundamental reason for project is helpful it is the initial contact with the client that will set direction. This briefing allows the client to explain the situation and requirements as they perceive them to be.² It's a time for careful and active listening by the consultants to help conceptualise vague situations.³ Consultants must have the ability to relate to the client⁴ and show empathy for their situation. Particularly, they are looking for the consultants to step into their shoes and provide new insights. The client doesn't want to see or hear a regurgitation of what they already know. Therefore, consultants must gain an understanding of what benefits the client is hoping for from the project.⁵ In the same theme, client suggestions need to be taken onboard and worked through for possible relevance to the project. For example, if a client suggests that possible solutions could be drawn from other industries that already experienced the current business issue then this requirement needs to be incorporated into the project. Similarly, multiple dimensions of the issue raised by the client must also be considered. For example, the client suggests there is a relationship between strategy, culture and competitiveness then there needs to be a discussion to determine if this aspect can fall within or outside the scope of the project.

The second element aims to shape the business issues into succinct and clear statements or questions that need to be answered. While such a task may be relatively straight forward the underlying meaning needs to be made explicit. This can be done by defining the scope of the project in terms of both direction and boundaries. One simple means to facilitate issue or problem formulation is to relate it to the level of the organisation and its primary area of concern as shown in Figure 2. For example, if the briefing is being provided by the Marketing Director of a large multi-national company then strategy and strategic options would be the primary area of concern.

Figure 2.
Three organisational levels and primary concern



However, in management consulting terms the starting point will depend on the consultants' view on the nature of the problem or issue to be dealt with.⁶ Thus the third element comprises of four different levels at which consultants can start a consultancy project, i.e., levels of intervention, refer Figure 3 below. Using the concepts of organisational and intervention levels can help define the questions that need to be answered to resolve the client's business concerns and issues.⁷

Figure 3.
Levels of intervention, assumptions and hypotheses

Level	Assumptions	Hypotheses	Intervention
1	Business performance	The purposes to be pursued to achieve	PURPOSE
2	The purpose that is to be achieved	The issues that relate to the achievement of this purpose	↓ ISSUES
3	The issues that must be put in place	How they might be resolved	↓ SOLUTIONS
4	The solutions that must be put in place	How the solutions might be best implemented	↓ IMPLEMENTATION

(Source and adapted from Markham, C. 1994 The Top Consultant 3rd ed. Ch 5. pp.84 & 89)

Once the questions have been formulated the problem solving approach can provide a process to develop hypotheses which are then tested through the collection of suitable data.⁸ This aspect of the management consultancy process is the fundamental difference between the group assignment and having a structured approach to the project. Under the proposed approach, assumptions can be taken as valid and a hypothesis is considered supposition that is only conjectural.⁹ The critical point of learning is having a specific reason to collect information to address the hypothesis. In essence, the hypotheses provide a guide to data collection which was somewhat of a shortcoming in the group assignment process. Our group’s approach could have benefited from wording the actions into a ‘We believe that ...’ statements. In doing so, create a very purposeful direction with explicit linkage to all activities undertaken by the group.

The final element reflects on client communications and group cohesiveness. The importance of written communication and its content constitutes another critical process for a management consultancy project. In our group’s case no written brief was given by the client. However, a one-page briefing document, refer Appendix A, was prepared and it remains unclear if the team leader sent it to the client. Regardless, this simple piece of communication provided the foundation for building the relationship with the client. In hindsight, time spent discussing the content of the brief with the client and within the group would appear to have been critical in helping

guide group purpose and cohesiveness. The brief is a primary reference point from which the consultancy process and project develops and solidifies. An additional step in stage one would be to respond to client feedback with a project proposal. Specifically, the proposal defines the objectives for and the approach towards the consultancy project based on an agreed understanding of the issues by the client and the group.¹⁰ The proposal needs to make explicit the following;

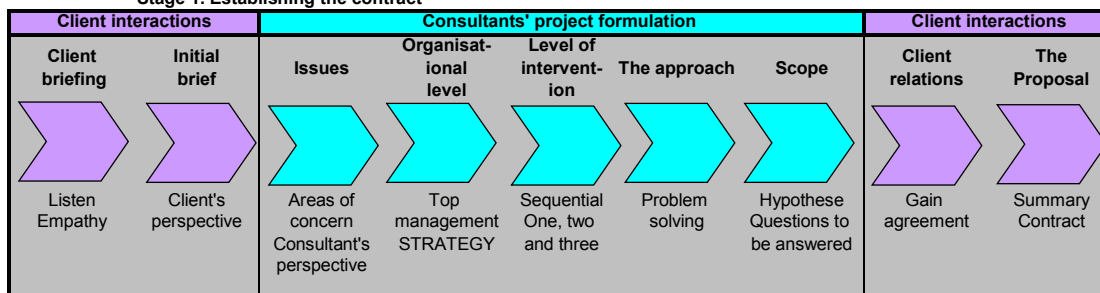
- ✓ *The problem (described in the context of the client’s business situation, strategy and competitive position).*
- ✓ *The anticipated benefits of the assignment*
- ✓ *The methods and approaches the consultancy will use*
- ✓ *The results that are expected from these approaches.*

(Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.94)

In preparing a proposal our group would have avoided each member developing their own interpretation of the desired project process and requirements. Importantly, the proposal process could have resolved considerable conflict and disagreement amongst the group members.

The above process greatly expands the original activity one into a comprehensive and professional process, refer Figure 4 below. It seeks to put the investment of time, resources and the client relations up front at the very start of the management consultancy process. The two pillars of stage one are client interactions and relations and the project formulation and proposal or contract, refer Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. The desired consulting process - How to get started
 Stage 1. Establishing the contract



(Sourced and adapted from Markham, C. 1994 The Top Consultant 3rd ed. Koan Page Ch. 5, p.103 and MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 1, slide 14)

In following the above process described in Figure 4, the lengthy information gathering process undertaken by the group would have been targeted to specific data collection. The accuracy and relevance of the data collected would not have been a concern. Likewise, the subjective interpretation of the data offered little value to the client. Thus the analysis of the data collected under the proposed process would have lead to conclusions valued by the client.

All three learnings are interwoven into stage one but also apply throughout the entire consultancy process. In particular, presenting the project findings was taken as a way of summarising the activities as described in Figure 1. Discussion and agreement was not possible on a framework and structure for the report and presentation. This dilemma was in part an outcome of the three separate interpretations of what the project was meant to deliver to the client, i.e., a marketing solution (markets), a technical solution (technologies) and a strategic solution (strategy). Therefore, the message was diluted by the lack of structure. In fact, there were three separate messages competing to answer the same business problem and address the issues.¹¹

Two concepts are put forward to help better facilitate a more structured approach to thinking and communicating.¹² They are the 'Pyramid Principle' and the SCQA concept both considered worthwhile for consultants to have in their kit bag. The pyramid principle offers a top-down approach that moves from a main message to the ideas, information and data that support it.¹³ It uses question and answer method to achieve a logical hierarchy of thought.¹⁴ This principle is complemented by the SCQA concept¹⁵ which is an acronym for;

Situation

Complication

Question

AnsWER

It is this 'answer' section that provides the governing thought for the pyramid structure.¹⁶

In summary, the learnings draw out how better to build client relations and lessen group conflict and disagreement. Specifically, the proposed stage one of the consultancy process is built on two pillars. They are meaningful client interactions and structured project formulation that incorporates five key elements. Adopting the stage one methodology will have a significantly positive influence on the group performance and the project's value. The learnings rely on the premise that there is a need for a framework for thought development and presentation structure. All these requirements are considered critical in any management consultancy project.

References and end notes.

- ¹ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 1, slide 14
- ² Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.91.
- ³ Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.90.
- ⁴ Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.90.
- ⁵ Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.90.
- ⁶ Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.79.
- ⁷ Markham, C. 1994 The Top Consultant 3rd ed. Koan Page Ch. 5, p.85
- ⁸ Markham, C. 1994 The Top Consultant 3rd ed. Koan Page Ch. 5, p.85
- ⁹ Markham, C. 1994 The Top Consultant 3rd ed. Koan Page Ch. 5, p.85
- ¹⁰ Hussey, D. 1998 @The Entry Phase@, in Sadler, P. (ed) Management Consultancy: handbook of best practice, London: Kogan p.94.
- ¹¹ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slides 6 & 7
- ¹² MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slide 8
- ¹³ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slide 8
- ¹⁴ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slide 8
- ¹⁵ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slides 13 & 14
- ¹⁶ MGSM953 lecture 2006 Term 2, Session 9, slide 14