

Cornelia Edding, 19 September 2009

Consulting in Times of Crisis

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Is there a crisis – and if so, how do people practice consulting in it? In order to get an overview that goes beyond my own work horizon, I interviewed 15 colleagues during the last few months. All of them are coaches and/or supervisors, all practice team supervision and individual coaching. They work in different fields – youth welfare, hospital, drug counselling, psychiatry, public administration, children's homes etc. The examples they mention come from the non-profit sector, therefore my findings are mostly from that field. I would like also interview supervisors who work in the business sector. The present lecture is hence a presentation of interim results. The statements are rather multifarious. I will try to develop some main topics in this synopsis.

My report contains the following sections:

1. The crisis comes through the back door
2. Some principles of supervision are becoming more important
3. The settings are getting diluted
4. Procedures and concepts of consultants
5. Leadership and crisis

1. The crisis comes through the back door

When asked, most of my colleagues said: Actually we don't really feel the crisis in our supervision and coaching practice. In our spheres of activity nothing much has changed. The subsequent conversation then shows that this is not correct. The teams and the managers they consult are concerned and react but there aren't any dramatic events. The clients are affected by the economization of all fields, by obligations to save money and by restructuring measures, sometimes also "only" by their clients' change. Pressure and stress have increased everywhere. In some teams solidarity has clearly declined. At many places consultants encounter a basic feeling of uncertainty and tension. It is often only during the conversation that this fact becomes clear, as well as how these symptoms are linked with a changed work context.

Some examples:

- In a team for family care nothing has actually changed, says the supervisor. But they have become less tolerant with each other, less willing to stand in and help out. It

turns out that their clients have changed because they are massively affected by the crisis. The clients' problems have become more complex and threatening to their subsistence. The options decrease, consultants feel powerless.

- A group of therapists in a psychiatric hospital develops a conceptual self-definition. They belong to various different "schools" – from music therapy according to depth-psychology principles to "simple" work therapy. Now they want to communicate their own respective approaches more clearly and develop one shared external identity. They want to become more visible as a group in the hospital. They wish to have a closer integration in the clinic and a more profiled image. The clinic undergoes a constant process of restructuring, merging, cost-cutting.
- A project group, formed to develop a concept for the de-municipalisation of municipal institutions in line with the political climate, get into such severe inner conflicts that they become unable to work and look for help. During the consulting sessions, no relationship conflicts turn up but very different value ideas regarding to task. What to do if the task is absolutely contrary to one's own moral concept?
- The supervision process in the team of an integration school is "completely normal". It is mainly about the cooperation of the different professions involved – teachers, social education workers, nursery school teachers – and the associated questions of status. No crisis is felt because they don't know yet that integration schools will be abolished.

2. Some principles of supervision are becoming more important

- **Field experience.** The majority of colleagues say: no more consulting without knowledge of the respective field! Consultants should know the specific dynamics of a field before they accept a job because that will at least give them have an idea of the complicated sorting work to be done in order to get an overview or how much they will be demanded in their ability of containment.

Contracting entities, too, expect more and more field knowledge; many consider it ideal if consultants have worked in the field themselves in a different, non-consulting role.

- **Task orientation.** A clear orientation towards the respective tasks is indispensable in order to understand conflicts correctly. Many teams and many individuals are very much under pressure. Supervisors are offered the task of solving relationship conflicts, and quite a number of us are absolutely seducible to accept such offers. In an investigation carried out many years ago, my colleague Bert Voigt found out that people in the non-profit sector gladly define factual and work conflicts as relationship conflicts, whereas in

the profit sector it is the other way round – people like to objectify relationship conflicts. But in the current situation we have the additional fact that external conditions such as higher case numbers or the reassessment of individual jobs produce pressure or an apparent lack of collegiality. Tension and uncertainty also strain the relationships. Consultants have to pay attention and be diligent to avoid mixing up cause and effect and make sure that the problems are rightly addressed and negotiated.

- **Triangle contracts** are obtaining a new importance. The triangle contract integrates supervision in the organisation and secures the coach's access – if needed – to the respective superiors and contracting entities. Many issues discussed in the supervision have their origin outside. Working conditions have changed, which has repercussions on cooperation and personal wellbeing. A number of colleagues use the triangle contract in this situation to include the next higher level. Not all of them do this, nevertheless – some try instead to prepare their clients for a dispute or for the presentation of a request. Some do both.

- **Result orientation.** Contracting entities and consultants agree in the result orientation. Open-end supervision processes offered as hygienic measure to individuals or teams have become the exception. Objectives – and sometimes very narrow ones – are defined. What is to be achieved and in which time? Some colleagues expect themselves to generate one result including result assurance per hour. They use this constant result assurance as a means to reduce the clients' uncertainty.

Supervision and coaching present themselves here as a very specific service which is quite tightly knit into the organisation.

3. The settings are getting diluted

When I addressed their supervision sessions, many of my respondents asked back: "Do you mean classic supervision?" By this they understand team, case or individual supervision as a prolonged accompaniment to increase professionalism. In the talks I had these were the exception rather than the rule. Instead, the following forms were described:

- **A change back and forth between team and case supervision** is a matter of course to nearly all of them.

- **A link between further training and team development.** Newly composed teams attend workshops together, whose topics are predefined but in such a general way that a lot is possible under them. The consultant changes focus and level – between the set topic and the Here and Now of the group. For example, it can be discussed whether a specific person should or shouldn't take part – i.e. a classic question of group boundaries.

- **The link between supervision and further training:** the supervisor connects her supervisory work with short presentations. These have been agreed before and their subjects are technical topics.

- **Combination of team supervision and leadership coaching.** Several colleagues report that they change between team supervision and leadership coaching. If sensible and necessary, they spend some hours coaching the team leader and then continue with team supervision – with or without the leader.

- **Supervisory organisational consulting** develops far-reaching ideas from the insights and results gained in individual or team supervision. Other parts of the organisation are included. This expansion is legitimised by the first round of clients and then secured with a new official assignment.

- **Event supervision** was the name one colleague gave a yearly meeting of the staff of a small company. These supervised meetings have the purpose to talk and discuss topics that concern everybody. They are very important to the staff as a source of relief and reassurance regarding relations, for pausing and thinking in a burdening and ever more stressful work life; the staff absolutely perceive these meetings as a process, whereas the supervisor subjectively always starts from scratch again.

- **Expert consulting** on work organisation, followed by supervision of the implementation.

4. Procedures and concepts of supervisors and coaches

- **First comes “detoxication”** – Nearly everybody reports that their meetings start with a phase of complaining, telling, letting off steam. This phase of “detoxication”, as one colleague called it, has become much more important. Uncertainty and frustration are so big in many cases that further work would not be possible at all without an extensive

phase of talk. The supervisor's role in this phase consists in patient admitting of this talk, encouraging it and promoting it by asking questions. Different opinions can be expressed, too, in order to perceive them of all. The assessment of the importance of this phase varies. Some consider it to be a necessary process of relief before the discussion of "the topic proper".

- **Assuring successes** is a work principle that many mention. Fear, uncertainty and pressure lead to feelings of powerlessness and resignation in many clients. Nothing can be brought about, after all, they say. To find and assure successes – big and small ones – systematically in this situation becomes an important part of the supervision; the clients learn or remember not to forget this, also in their everyday life.

- **The role has changed** – but not radically. It's rather that the weights have shifted: **Containment** is of very great importance – is the supervisor able to listen and take up without drowning and without turning away; can she hold, secure, clarify and convey the feeling that yes, there are possibilities to act in this situation.

To give information and orientation has become more important. One colleague says coaching is so popular not least because clients think more orientation is given there, because they have the feeling that they get more – more of what helps them to bear the situation and perhaps even determine it. If this is denied, the colleague says, the consequence is not self-reflection but the clients are thrown into additional crises. They then perceive dependency and neediness so strongly that they are less capable of acting for the task. The above-mentioned settings which link further training with supervision go into the same direction. One open but important question is: How can a coach inform, tell clients anything without having them adopt a pupils' attitude, giving away responsibility and the perception that they are the subjects of the situation.

To create under-structured situations – to my great surprise, about half of my respondents still work with under-structured situations. I had thought the extent of structuring was a dimension in the work in which the weights had shifted most – towards a higher degree of structuring. But this is not actually the case to the expected extent. Instead, after a first phase of talking and telling, for many there is still a phase in which the clients start a search movement, as it were, in the team as well as in individual talks, which shows the topics to be discussed.

To strengthen clients is a very important objective for nearly all of them. But this is done in very different ways. I was much impressed by how differently colleagues worked on strengthening their clients – and what they understand by strengthening, respectively. Here are some examples.

1) Acquiring categories for a specific kind of diagnostics: In one public institution, the consultant again and again helps the staff to sort: Which frustration develops because of their own lack of knowledge or incompetence, which frustration develops because there is dysfunctionality in their department and which frustration develops because the surrounding organisation imposes certain things on them? Which problems can be handled by learning something, which by talking to the general manager for once and which not at all because they come from outside? When they have categories for sorting, they don't need to digest everything as an offence against them personally. This strengthens them.

2) Helping to sort is also important for another kind of strengthening: Coaching a manager in a big foundation is about real or imagined dangers: Will his area be abolished by restructuring, subdivided and assigned to others? The client says of himself that he tends towards persecution mania anyway. To sort diligently which signs he sees, how he interprets them and how else they can be understood relieves and strengthens him.

3) Strengthening by increasing professionalism: The team in a drug institution fights measures of modernisation and cost-cutting via refusal. The manager is efficient but not very sustentative. The supervisor describes the team as neglected or run-down and works with them on developing functional positions, which makes the discussion more professional.

4) Developing strategies: A team in the youth welfare sector is stuck in a contradiction. They are to do case work in a resource-oriented way, but if they want to achieve anything, they have to mention deficit-oriented arguments towards the management. The supervisor, who completely sides with them, helps them to get well prepared for a dispute with their boss.

5) Offering orders: Uncertainty and pressure create a need for structure. Some colleagues strengthen individuals and teams by offering a raster, thus showing steps and ways to work on a problem. How can the work be organised? How can a case be discussed? How can a working style be presented?

5. Leading and crisis

My impression is that you see the crisis most clearly when you look at the longing for good leadership and the lack of it. Everybody wants more leadership, the teams as well as the leaders of the teams and the bosses of the team leaders. They want more information, more care, more certainty, more availability of superiors, more attention and communication. All supervisors say that they assume leadership, more leadership than they used to in the past, that sometimes there are phases in which, with or without

assignment to do so, they replace the leader. All criticise the leaders. They criticise the team leaders and the leaders of the team leaders. But many employees with and without leadership function have never learnt to express their wishes in front of a leader in an appropriate way. The relationship of many employees in the non-profit sector with authorities, which has always been difficult anyway, becomes a particular problem in times of uncertainty.

My colleagues report of many superiors who are incompetent, ruthless, inconsiderate or also helpless when “implementing” changes– if you can apply this word at all. The hunger for good leadership was found in all reports. At the same time many report that more and more teams who used to have coordinators shall now be integrated more closely into the organisation, with a real leadership function. They and their work can be better controlled in this way.

Some closing remarks:

- It seems to me that the elaboration and marking of positions is a personal task but also a task for professional associations, when so many things are in flux. Should I hold a trial supervision in advance or shouldn't I? How much orientation do I give? Am I willing to replace the leader? Do I work with the team and the leader at the same time, in parallel, one after the other? What do these decisions depend on?

- How can professional associations find a good way between the necessary adaptation of professional standards to altered working conditions on the one hand and sticking to existing professional standards on the other hand, which is necessary to assure the profile of the offer and prevent sliding into arbitrariness?