Working with Individuals in Organizations
Coaching, Facilitating Interaction with Others, and Strategic Advising

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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The primary focus of organization development (OD) is to enhance the performance of an organization. The work is seen in the context of organizational mission and group targets. Yet organizations are structured so that individuals are responsible for groups of people or for coordination of effort of numerous employees. Thus, no matter what a given consulting contract may entail, implementation of the work always involves various kinds of interaction between practitioners and individuals. Since these individuals play a critical role as “linking pins,” the quality of interaction between them and practitioners can greatly influence the success or failure of an intervention.

Work at the individual level requires a set of distinct skills primarily focused on working at the margin, when the pull of one-on-one interaction is toward more intimate connection among the people involved. Boundary management becomes a more complex matter as the practitioner is drawn to reveal more of his or her own self. If the practitioner is too supportive and becomes too close to the individual, something is lost by way of clean observation and the ability to take a strong (potentially opposing) stance. The skill is in striking a balance between strategic and intimate interactions with the individual while keeping in mind the larger objective of
enhancing organizational effectiveness. Strategic interactions are those designed to accomplish a task, and they often involve using hierarchical power. Intimate interactions are designed to bring people closer together and minimize power differences (see Nevis, Backman, & Nevis, 2003).

This chapter describes a model for characterizing and improving how working with individuals is carried out in the service of organization development. The model is an adaptation of a framework initially developed by the authors and Claire Stratford in 1997.

The need for a more complex framework for working with individuals in organizations is influenced by several developments. Almost all external consulting work involves partnering with internal specialists and managers on a range of initiatives, from planning events to supporting personal and professional development. Consulting that is geared to strategic planning, visioning, total quality management (TQM), and other structural interventions represents a significant investment by organizations in executive coaching. There are new writings about leadership focusing on the importance of self-awareness and conversational skills. Many practitioners are spending more and more time with senior executives in an advisory capacity, as opposed to being a process practitioner in the traditional sense. These observations lead to the conclusion that it is time to examine a systematic perspective of the possibilities and issues involved in various ways of working with individuals in the organizational context.

The Three Faces of Individual Work

Although there are many roles in which working with an individual takes place, three major categories can be identified. They are referred to as “faces” to emphasize that these are stances, each driven by the intent of the practitioner or intervener. Something different is accomplished in each face, using one-on-one interaction as the method of operation. In so doing, the faces represent ways of intervening to support the particular objective. Exhibit 21.1 lists the three faces.

The original model presented four faces of individual work: (1) coaching, (2) facilitating more effective interactions between people, (3) strategic advising, and (4) planning large system interventions. The fourth face is well known to OD practitioners; much has been written about this perspective and the issues involved. However, the reader is reminded that many of the issues of working in the three faces presented here apply to working with the individual in planning large system interventions.
It follows from the differences in these stances that a clear understanding of the intervener role is imperative. The sections in this chapter deal with each face, indicating special features and issues to consider:

1. Even though being in a coaching role does not prohibit the practitioner from giving advice to an individual, responsibility for the actions taken by the client rests with the client.
2. When acting as a strategic adviser, the practitioner is often asked to state unequivocally what course of action to take.
3. If the practitioner is asked to implement a plan of action, she is clearly taking on responsibility for the outcome. If she is doing so in the position of an internal practitioner, she is even more responsible.
4. To be effective as a coach, the practitioner must work to enhance the quality of the exchange or interaction between herself and the client.
5. When acting as a third-party intervener, the practitioner’s role is that of “stage manager” for the interaction between the two clients.

One way to better understand the contexts and intervention choices involved in organizational consulting is to pay attention to the complexity of each situation. Consulting involves entering often confusing and always-intricate organizational landscapes. It helps to sort out the presenting issues, the levels of system, and the choices available to the intervener
in determining the location and nature of the actual work. This enables the intervener to be clear about the purposes for engaging in one-on-one work. Table 21.1 presents a matrix that was developed to assist in this analysis.

Using the matrix as a guide, it is possible to analyze the intent of one-on-one work in relation to important aspects of a given assignment. For example, a practitioner may be contracted by a two-person system (an executive and a human resource director) to coach another manager. Although the desired outcome may be expressed in terms of increased effectiveness of the person being coached, the extent and nature of the practitioner’s interaction with the executive and HR director is often unclear. (More will be said later about this consulting challenge.) Experience in training coaches suggests that the most common source of difficulty for practitioners is not poor work with the person being coached but failure to pay enough attention to the quality of the interaction with the other individuals involved.

In another case, one may be working with a CEO, but the focus of the work is on issues related to the whole system, with little attention paid to the CEO’s management style or personality characteristics. Here, desired outcomes may be expressed in terms of new strategy or building a senior team. In some respects this looks like a coaching assignment, but it is more like acting as a strategic adviser.

In yet another case, an assignment of one of the authors, the contract was developed between the practitioners and the CEO. The work involved a culture change project with a major business unit of the firm, working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels Available</th>
<th>Point of Entry</th>
<th>Contracting Parties</th>
<th>Focus of Work</th>
<th>Scope of Desired Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual, lower-level, midlevel, upper-level, CEO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-person system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department or division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization or firm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
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*Source: Copyright © 1997 OSD Center, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.*
with an internal practitioner. As the work progressed, it became clear that
the internal practitioner did not like the executive in charge of the division
and was avoiding him in the process of implementing the work. Since the
internal practitioner was directing the project, it was necessary to confront
him about the situation. This led to some tough conversation in which, at
one point, the internal practitioner was challenged to change his attitude
or give up this assignment. Eventually, the scope of work was expanded to
include working one-on-one with the internal practitioner in the interest of
doing good work at the organizational level. Secondly, the internal practi-
tioner was being helped to see the dysfunctional nature of his behavior—a
frequent aspect of coaching work.

The First Face: Coaching

Coaching is first in this discussion because it is the first thing that comes
to mind when practitioners talk about one-on-one work. It is also one of
the first things raised by an organization that is interested in developing its
leaders. Consider the development continuum in Figure 21.1.

The Hanafin and Kitson (H&K) Development Continuum offers a menu
of development options ranging from completely internally resourced to

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**FIGURE 21.1. HANAFIN AND KITSON DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager’s coaching on the job</td>
<td>Company tailored skill/function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External coaching on the job</td>
<td>training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotational assignments</td>
<td>Company leadership development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special projects and assignments</td>
<td>program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessment and feedback**

- Performance appraisal
- External practitioner
- Succession plan
- Start-up
- Turnaround
- Priority initiatives
- Assessments
- Core program
- Modules
- Experiments
- Learning groups
- Business skills
- Function company forums
- Organizational and people skills
- Advanced degree programs
- Courses
- Conferences
- Professional networks

*Source: Copyright © 2002 Jonno Hanafin and Michael Kitson Associates, Inc.*
completely externally resourced, with variations in between. When it comes to building development plans for individuals, most managers are inclined to look first at the organization’s own catalog of company-offered training and development programs. Internal programs may be of good quality, but they are usually generic in their design and appeal. However, special cases—for example, identified high potentials or interpersonally inept technical wizards—warrant something more tailored to the particular need.

One favored approach with the high-potential individual is sending him to an intensive and expensive general management program at a prestigious university. Programs of this sort offer a base of high-level and strategic perspective, but they still may not address the specific development needs of individuals. In the case of highly skilled individuals, these programs are not the answer.

**Setting Up Coaching**

This is where the coaching option draws its appeal. An external coach is assigned to the individual with the objective of giving him or her focused and relevant guidance. Of course, all this assumes that the individual’s manager is also actively coaching the individual. A number of issues must be addressed at the start of the coaching engagement.

**Who Is the Client?** The practitioner needs to be clear, and in the process make sure everyone else is clear, about whom the practitioner is working for and who will decide whether the engagement is successful. Identifying the client has implications during the work for whether, how, and to whom progress is reported. Obviously, a stronger relationship can be built with the person being coached if he is the client and has the responsibility for communicating progress to the rest of the organization. Realistically, the initiating manager or bill payer may want at least a periodic high-level update from the practitioner. The terms and boundaries of such reporting need to be established up front. It is often useful to schedule regular updates involving the coach, the individual being coached, and the individual’s manager. This way everyone has access to the same information about the work. This also gives the practitioner an opportunity to hear how the individual describes progress to his manager.

**Who Chooses the Practitioner?** Even if the individual being coached has been “encouraged” to use a coach, the person being coached should have some say in the selection, perhaps being offered two or three coaches and
choosing one with whom there is good chemistry. Influencing the selection of the coach helps reduce resistance and gives the individual some ownership of the process. Matching coach and person to be coached is a two-way process; the practitioner and the person being coached need to feel it is a good fit.

**What Are the Coaching Goals?** Being engaged to “help someone become a better manager” is an invitation to trouble. The contract needs to be precise: What are the expected outcomes, and who will judge the results of the coaching assignment? The practitioner can support the organization by pushing for sharper definition of development goals. By asking probing questions and offering alternatives, the practitioner helps everyone develop a shared set of expectations.

**What Are the Boundary Conditions of the Coaching Work?** Are there things that are out of bounds in the work? Is it public knowledge that this individual is being coached? Can the practitioner speak with others in the organization? Who expects to be in the communications loop, and how will they be included? How long is the engagement projected to last? Involve everyone in determining the dimensions of the playing field.

**The Context of Coaching: A Blessing or a Curse?**

The context must be considered in any coaching assignment. Having a coach conveys very different meanings in different organizations. The practitioner needs to know whether coaching is primarily developmental or remedial. In some organizations, bringing in a coach for someone means the person is in trouble; a coach is a last-ditch effort to salvage a career or turn around sinking performance. In one multinational organization, it was even more specific: being assigned a coach meant you had ninety days to turn yourself around or face dismissal. These engagements are usually managed quite tightly, with rigorous performance criteria used to decide thumbs up or thumbs down at the end. Here, people being coached want to hide their coaches, discussing the matter only with those who need to know. In other organizations, having a coach means you are one of the chosen few and have been designated for stardom. After all, the organization would not incur the considerable expense of a coach if it did not have some indication of a satisfactory return on investment. In this instance, a coach is a corporate seal of approval to be proudly discussed and displayed.
There is another consideration somewhere in between the blessing and
the curse that requires attention: assessment. Is the coach being brought in
to assess the potential, or to salvage the ability, of the individual? The dis-
tinction of purpose between development and assessment is critical to the
work. Both tasks add value. The important thing is clarity of intent. It can
confuse all involved if the roles of assessor and developer are combined.
Organizations that use different resources for assessment and development
tend to be more effective at developing their people. Individuals gener-
ally feel freer to open up to someone who is not influencing their career
possibilities.

The Second Face: Facilitating More Effective
Interactions Between People

The practitioner’s second face includes two-person consulting and develop-
ing readiness for team building.

Two-Person System Consultation

In this work, the focus is on the interactions of the two people and the
desired outcome is an enhanced working relationship. One application
might be to support better coordination between a marketing director and
the head of engineering. Another is to reduce conflict that has interfered
with the effective functioning of either party or the two-person system as a
whole. In dispute situations, the work is called third-party intervention. In
each instance, the parties need to work together to accomplish some objec-
tive that is important to each but cannot be achieved by one of them alone.
In his famous experiments on intergroup conflict, Sherif (1971) referred
to this objective as a “superordinate goal.” At some point, the work involves
working with each individual in the dyad, both separately and when they
are together. This allows each person to see and accept individual differ-
ences and gain some insight into how they contribute to the dynamic that
has been created. The importance of the individual work is that it supports
the pair to engage in what is often a difficult conversation.

Individual work is generally needed to help bring the parties together.
This is a bridging or gate-keeping role and may be seen as a variation of
shuttle diplomacy. None of what is being said is new to the experienced
practitioner. Often missed by both new and advanced practitioners is that
a very particular stance is required:
• Focusing on readiness to engage—not rushing into meeting before each party is ready and conditions and ground rules are clarified.
• Balancing the attention paid to each person. This ranges from time spent with each party alone to allowing equal airtime when they are together.
• Avoiding any semblance of bias or alignment with one party, or seeing one party as the needy one or the culprit.
• Maintaining a neutral stance. Focus on the collective behavior of the two-person system—that is, how they speak, respond, and react to each other.
• Avoiding involvement in the content or substantive issues. Heightening awareness of the individuals about the potential value of collaboration and the obstacles that impede it.
• Using self to establish trust in the process, to encourage a hopeful attitude in each individual and to teach the parties strategies for engaging with each other outside the session.

The role of the intervener is to improve the functioning of the pair as a system and support the interaction of the two. There are elements of individual work that support two-person work:

• Surfacing projections each has concerning the other
• Surfacing fantasies about what will happen if they get together
• Supporting each to feel more in control over what might happen
• Facilitating meetings, managing the logistics involved
• Acting to evoke a sense of hopefulness by soliciting from each person evidence of what the two do well together and what their strengths are

In a meeting with one of the individuals, the intervener might ask questions such as:

• How would you describe how the other behaves when with you?
• What would the other say about how you behave when the two of you are together?
• What are your objections to meeting with the other, to talking openly?
• What are the goals and values that the two of you share?
• What would it take to cooperate with the other?
• What do you think are the reasons the other doesn’t cooperate with you?

Obviously, this work cannot be successful if both parties do not have some motivation to engage each other. One party is often more willing
than the other. Dealing with this disparity requires great skill in working with each person alone in a way that avoids any sign of partiality. Any resistance on either side is to be respected.

There are also some critical moments in which individual work is useful when both are together. Here, too, the focus is on supporting the two individuals to engage each other. Possible interventions include:

- Promoting the parties to talk to each other, not to the intervener
- Encouraging sharing of information on the part of both individuals; this includes facts, attitudes, feelings, projections, and fantasies about “What might happen if . . . ?”
- After the intervener addresses one party and gets a response, allowing the other party to comment on the first party’s response
- Periodically checking in with each party
- Underscoring progress on the part of each person
- Allowing closure: what was accomplished by each, and work yet to be done

Developing Readiness for Team Building

These principles and suggestions apply equally well in preparing people to engage in team-building events, particularly in work to produce readiness for participation on a team. However, team development is a public event that usually involves hierarchical differences. Individuals tend to be more accepting of tough intervener statements made to them in a private setting, but the same statements made in front of others can provoke anger and defensiveness. It is important to recognize (as is more readily observed in Eastern cultures) that saving face is also important in the Western world. The last thing an intervener wants is to embarrass a leader or manager in front of her staff. For this reason, it is often necessary to do a considerable amount of work individually with the team leaders before team building occurs. Building readiness, creating ownership, clarifying objectives, and managing expectations increase the success of the endeavor.

The Third Face: Strategic Advising

This stance requires the intervener to shift the balance between process consultation and involvement in content. Both may be used in all three faces, but with this face there is much less concern with maintaining a
neutral position. Opinions, points of view, information, even biases, are expected from the intervener. If process consultation based on Gestalt or another orientation stresses the enhancement of client awareness, strategic advising or content consultation focuses more on client behavior and action. Interveners should feel free to support one alternative out of several that the client may be considering, or to attempt to convince the client not to take an action that is being contemplated. In so doing, the intervener assumes responsibility for the outcome. Experienced practitioners often shift between process consulting and content consulting for a period of time. The shift can be useful in supporting the client; it can have the effect of broadening awareness.

In one example, after hearing executives complain for years about their firm’s incentive compensation plan, a practitioner convened a meeting of several executives and recommended that the program be changed. After partnering with the senior vice president of human resources and another executive and seeking the expertise of a compensation specialist, a new compensation plan was developed. It is worth noting that the initial contract had nothing to do with executive compensation. Rather, the purpose of the work was to conduct educational interventions and related consulting to help the firm function better as a knowledge-based network. Also of significance is that the practitioner had gained more than ten years of experience developing appraisal and compensation systems in an earlier career. The experience served to inform the practitioner about what was needed.

In another example, the vice president of marketing was advised for several years that he would not make his commercial marketing targets because he did not have enough marketing and sales personnel with the expertise required to do the job. The practitioner tells the executive what he needs and makes comments about certain individuals who are seen as failing in the job. What right does a practitioner have to do this? After all, the practitioner was not hired to give advice on commercial marketing. The answer is that the practitioner had worked with commercial marketing organizations in similar businesses and had many years of experience in assessing managerial talent. Of course, the practitioner might have been wrong to speak up; however, the willingness to take the risk in such instances is a trademark of the strategic adviser.

These examples can have a negative effect. A practitioner can give poor advice with detrimental results or can be told not to interfere. One important consideration for the practitioner is the nature of the relationship with the client organization—specifically, years of experience with a client. This constitutes a better base for opinion and enhances the possibility of being
heard as a respected voice that is genuinely trying to help the organization achieve its desired goals.

On the other hand, giving advice can violate an expectation or a contract. For example, consider the impact of offering an opinion about the suitability of an individual for a promotion when your data about the person has been largely derived during training or through coaching that was deemed to be a private matter. This is a classic dilemma for internal practitioners, who have all kinds of opportunity to make observations about managers. If there is a presumed confidentiality in these encounters, how does the internal practitioner respond when an executive asks for an opinion about an individual? An internal or external practitioner asked to evaluate an individual has an obligation to let the individual know this may happen.

Practitioners who see themselves as strategic advisers will recognize that their struggle may be more around how to handle the familiarity and intimacy that develop with the client. Practitioners who have worked with an organization for many years and are held in high esteem often find that it is almost impossible to maintain a neutral stance or operate on the margin. They are now members of the client family. How is the work affected, and how does everyone involved adapt to this state of affairs? How does a practitioner maintain an external consulting role under these circumstances? This type of relationship clearly changes the nature of the interactions with the firm.

Distortions in Working at the Individual Level

Practitioners are faced with a unique set of dynamics when working with the individual, regardless of stance or role. In organizational consulting, the marginality of the practitioner is a major asset. In the initial stages of consulting, when the practitioner begins the work, the lack of knowledge about the system allows the practitioner to take in data and information with fresh eyes. This openness is a major strength and opportunity, although some practitioners pressure themselves to quickly draw conclusions in order to feel competent. As the work progresses, the practitioner builds a working relationship with the client and gradually loses some of the newness and marginality. This progression is natural. However, there are some pitfalls present, in the form of what is referred to as “distortions.” Two distortions that are talked about in the clinical world are transference and counter transference. Transference is the distortion in attribution and expectation that the client has relative to the therapist. Counter transference is the distortion of perception and attitude that develops on the part
of the therapist. Consulting distortions are discussed here from the perspective of the client and the practitioner.

Client Distortions That Affect the Work

Therapists need to be aware and attend to client transference and its impact on the therapist-client relationship. Similarly, practitioners have to be vigilant about how client distortions interfere with the contact between the individual members of the organization and the practitioner.

The Paradox of Engagement One of the wonderful paradoxes of consulting is having a client contact a practitioner, contract for a major change initiative, and then immediately resist the change. The intent to change is real, but when it actually comes down to the what and how of the change, natural self-preservation mechanisms kick in.

Over There Most people acknowledge that there are problems in the organization needing to be addressed. However, few problems are owned. Individuals or groups seldom see themselves as needing to change. Pointing to where the “real” problem is, we usually point “over there” — not with me or us. For example, leaders are eager to engage practitioners to fix cultural or systemic shortcomings but resist looking at how they contribute to sustaining the status quo through their own behavior and thinking.

Whatever You Say Even though it is quite flattering to have a client willingly accept the influence of the practitioner, unconditional acceptance is questionable. A pattern of joining with others without consideration of one’s own perspective is problematic. The job for the practitioner is to support the client in differentiating herself.

Consultants Are People Who Borrow Your Watch to Tell You What Time It Is Individuals in organizations often lump practitioners into one group. If they have had a negative experience with any consultant or practitioner, then all practitioners are suspect. Practitioners who take the time to build relationships with members of the client system, showing their uniqueness, greatly decrease the chance of being viewed as “just another practitioner.”

Practitioner Distortions That Affect the Work

In the world of organizational consulting, many potential distortions are also likely to occur and require the practitioner to become aware of his
or her predisposition to skew the relationships and the work. Some of the distortions that are seen in practitioners are discussed here.

**Let Me Show You How Good I Am** The urge to be perceived by a new client as capable and experienced can lead practitioners to end the scanning and assessment process too soon. This eagerness, driven by anxiety to be judged as an expert, causes major blind spots. The result can be loss of the most valuable asset that a practitioner has when entering a system: his or her ignorance or desire to learn. This ignorance should be used to maintain openness and curiosity rather than to shape premature certainties.

**I’ve Seen This Before** This is the tendency to expect the next client to be the same as the last client. Work in the same industry obviously brings some similarities. However, the degree to which the practitioner can begin by searching out how the new client is unlike the last one will result in less distortion. This problem is caused not so much by anxiety but by overconfidence or sheer laziness.

**Playing Favorites** The tendency is to form likes and dislikes about people or hold ingrained values about what is good or bad behavior. All practitioners have particular kinds of people with whom they prefer to work. When they work with a difficult manager or with someone whose style is different from their own, it becomes difficult to remain neutral. This can result in less patience or creativity in the client engagement. Likewise, practitioners often move closer to clients they like and fail to see less effective aspects of their behavior. Practitioners may arrange to avoid or seek some people and some parts of the organization. Biases such as these hinder the effectiveness of the work.

**Becoming Too Familiar** As the work progresses, practitioners are likely to either develop confidence in the client and begin to accept the perspective of the client without question or have less confidence in the client and become too doubtful and dismissive. Either tendency carried too far skews the work. Even the most competent client has errors in thinking and occasional miscues, and those with suspicious judgment will sometimes be correct in their appraisal.

**Hooked on Power** Every human being has some behavioral pattern of dealing with issues of control, power, and authority. Most independent practitioners are highly autonomous people who possess a great deal of control,
power, and authority about what they do. They also carry a lot of power in organizations by virtue of their role. The key for practitioners is to be mindful of how the work is affected by their personal issues of power.

Self-knowledge is necessary to effectively manage practitioner distortions. Some questions that can be asked include the following:

- What are my values that I do not wish to compromise?
- Is this contract within my range of limits regarding use of myself?
- Who does this person remind me of? How is he or she different?
- Why am I irritated? What does this remind me of?
- What am I avoiding here? How would it help the situation to deal with it more directly?
- What is my stance in relation to authority? How did I become this way?

**Conclusion**

Working with the individual is an exciting and critical aspect of organization development. It allows the intervener to influence key members of the organization by creating opportunities that usually are not possible while working at larger levels of systems. On the other hand, it creates tension and dilemma, mismanagement of which can negatively affect an organizational intervention. By developing a heightened awareness of the issues involved, and through enhanced skills for working at the individual level within a range of contexts, interveners can significantly improve their work. This chapter offers a model to assist in this endeavor.

**References**
