

Beowulf as the Management Consultant: An Analogy of the Management Consulting Process By Edward Simmons

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ABSTRACT

According to Kubr (1996), management consulting should be viewed as a process with five distinct phases: 1. Entry, 2. Diagnosis, 3. Action Planning, 4. Implementation, 5. Termination. This process is analogous to the process that Beowulf goes through in the epic poem Beowulf, following the management consulting process perfectly from entry to termination. This paper is an analysis of the management consulting process as defined by Kubr, using the epic poem Beowulf as an analogy for the process itself. The procedure is to view Beowulf's actions as having parts that can be considered errors in the management consulting process, and parts that can be considered examples of the management consulting process done well. The purpose is to learn about the management consulting process itself, and develop a list of common errors to avoid and techniques to use as a method to improve performance in any management consulting endeavor.

BEOWULF AS THE MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT: AN ANALOGY OF THE MANAGEMENT CONSULTING PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

According to, Greiner and Metzger, 1983, “Management consulting is an advisory service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons who assist, in an objective and independent manner, the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, recommend solutions to these problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions”¹. Kubr (1996) takes this further and states that management consulting should be viewed as a process with five distinct phases: 1. Entry, 2. Diagnosis, 3. Action Planning, 4. Implementation, 5. Termination ². This process is analogous to the process that Beowulf goes through in the epic poem Beowulf, following the management consulting process perfectly from entry to termination.

The story of Beowulf, is the story of a great warrior that is hired by the king of Denmark to kill a beast that is terrorizing his country. Beowulf accepts the job, kills the beast, and returns home after a job well done. In David Whyte’s book, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, Beowulf has

¹ Greiner, L., Metzger, R. *Consulting to Management*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983. 7.

² Kubor, M. *Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession (3rd ed)*. Geneva: International Labour Office. 1996.

been described as an analogy for power and vulnerability in the work place³. The inspiration for this paper developed from his analysis of classic poetry in a modern day business context.

As a result, this paper is an analysis of the management consulting process as defined by Kubr, using Beowulf as an analogy for the process itself. The procedure is to view Beowulf's actions as having parts that can be considered missteps or errors in the management consulting process, and parts that can be considered examples of the management consulting process done well. The purpose is to learn about the management consulting process itself, and develop a list of common errors to avoid and techniques to use as a method to improve performance in any management consulting endeavor.

ENTRY

Kubr defines the entry phase as “the initial phase in any consulting process and assignment. During entry, the consultant and the client get together, try to learn as much as possible about each other, discuss and define the reason for which the consultant has been brought in, and on this basis agree on the scope of the assignment and the approach to be taken”⁴. Basically, the entry phase exists to determine whether the consultant is right for the organization they are meeting with, and whether the organizations problems are right for the consultant. In this phase there must be a match between the consultant's skill set and the problems the organization is facing.

³ Whyte, David. *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Corporate Soul in America*. New York, New York: Currency Double Day. 1996.

⁴ Kubr, M. *Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession (3rd ed.)*. Geneva: International Labour Office. 1996. 141.

The entry phase for Beowulf occurs, when, after hearing of the troubles of the Danish king, Beowulf forms a team, travels to Denmark, and meets with the king's representatives. The scene is written as, "*Strangers, you have steered this steep craft through the sea-ways, sought our coast. I see you are warriors; you wear that dress now. I must ask who you are*".

This is the most important aspect of the entry phase, the explanation of "who you are". As Kubr says (141), the entry phase is the initial contact, and its whole purpose is for the consultant to explain who they are and what they are there for. It is not enough to look like warriors. A consultant must possess the skills necessary to do the job correctly, and the entry phase should be a determination of if the organization and the consultant fit.

Furthermore, as Kubr says, "the consultant is a stranger to the client organization"(141). It is important in the entry phase to establish "mutual trust". This is analogous to the point in Beowulf when the team is asked to explain "who they are", "*I'll have your names now, and the names of your fathers; or further you shall not go as undeclared spies in the Danish land*".

There is an emphasis on reassurance. Consultants are often called in because, as in Beowulf, an organization is facing problems that threaten to destroy it. This often breeds "complexity and uncertainty"⁵. In this type of organizational setting "Complexity creates confusion; uncertainty creates fear"⁶. Both have the potential to destroy an organization and/or hamper any consulting effort. The consultant therefore, has been successful in the entry phase when they have proven that they have the right skill set for the job and the client feels confident that this is so.

⁵ "The Advice Business." *The Economist* 22 (1997): 3.

⁶ "The Advice Business." *The Economist* 22 (1997): 3

The final key aspect of the entry phase is the identification of the problem. It is of utmost importance that this be executed correctly because all other actions going forward are defined in terms of the stated problem. Beowulf's team makes a major, but very common error in this regard by presuming in advance that they know what the problem is and that they have a perfect plan to fix it. Beowulf speaks, "*You must know if indeed there is truth in what is told in Geatland, that among the Scyldings some enemy, an obscure assailant in the opaque night-times, makes spectacles of spoil and slaughter in hideous feud. To Hrothgar I would openheartedly unfold a plan*".

Beowulf is saying, "we know there is a monster killing people, and we know how to fix it". This is essentially looking at an organization for the first time and announcing that you know exactly what is wrong and how to fix it. This is a significant mistake at this stage; the identification of the problem should only come after careful examination of information that comes out of the entry meeting, and a plan of action should never be presumed.

DIAGNOSIS

The second stage in the consulting process is diagnosis. "The purpose of diagnosis is to examine the problem faced and the purposes pursued by the client in detail and in depth, identify the factors and forces that are causing and influencing the problem and prepare all information needed for deciding how to orient work on the solution to the problem"⁷.

Beowulf and his team skip this stage almost entirely. Beowulf meets the king and announces "*The affair of Grendel has been known to me on my native turf*". Beowulf

⁷ Kubr, M. *Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession (3rd ed)*. Geneva: International Labour Office. 1996. 167.

assumes that he already has all the information he needs, and that his version of Denmark's problem is the correct version. This scenario is similar to one in which a consultant is hired, and then walks into the CEO's office announcing that he/she knows exactly what the problem is and how to fix it before doing any investigative work or analysis, a disastrous error.

The nature of diagnosis is to examine all the symptoms of the problem across every area of the organization, look for potential sources of the problem. Not even the best consultants can do this without careful analysis; however it is a mistake many make it, including Beowulf. "Management consultancies are famous for failing to practice what they preach. Consultants are often so confident of their own abilities that they are no good at taking orders. They think that their own organization is so superior that they make a hash of mergers and acquisitions"⁸, as well as make presumptions about problem solutions and their own genius. Thus, many consultants believe, like Beowulf, that they are automatically right and already know the answers to problems that they have determined based on nothing but their own feelings of infallibility.

Furthermore, Beowulf makes a second error in presuming that the government of Denmark possesses the necessary potential "to make changes and resolve the problem effectively", (Kubr, 174), and that he will be "*offered treasures in return for his courage*". However, in the consulting process "success obviously depends on the client organization being able to do what must be done to benefit from the consulting input and being motivated to do it. If there is an implementation gap between what is necessary for

⁸ "The Advice Business." *The Economist*, 22 (1997): 3

success and what the client is able and willing to do, then the anticipated benefits will not occur”⁹.

Beowulf gives this no consideration. He acts on the assumption that because his client is the king, he will have all the necessary resources to pay for his services and pay for the implementation of his plan, as well as for all the travel expenses, etc. This is a huge assumption and one that, if wrong, can undermine all the consultant’s efforts and make the whole process a failure, as one study suggests, “such mismatching occurs very frequently and at enormous cost to clients and consultants alike”, (Schaffer, 2002).

ACTION PLANNING

Action planning “includes developing solutions to the problem diagnosed, choosing among alternative solutions, presenting proposals to the client, and preparing for the implementation of the solution chosen by the client”, (Kubr, 2005). Basically action planning involves taking all the information gathered in diagnosis and turning it into a plan that will work for that particular organization. As Kubr (2005) says, “diagnosis provides the basic orientation for action planning efforts”.

Beowulf takes this stage very seriously, as it is his life he is taking into his hands, and brings a definite plan to the king; the plan being to fight Grendel with his bare hands, “*With bare hands shall I grapple with the fiend, fight to the death here, hater and hated*”.

Beowulf, in this case, follows Kubr’s model by preparing the solution and bringing it to the client organization for approval. What he does well is that his solution

⁹ Schaffer, R. H. “High Impact Consulting Achieving Extraordinary Results” *Consulting to Management* 13,2 (2002): 12-18.

is simple and easy to implement, two important characteristics of any problem solving plan.

Also, the solution that pleases the king, which is a very important aspect of any purposed solution for the simple fact that what management does not approve does not get done. Beowulf's solution has the full support of the king, and his eternal gratitude.

“So it is to fight in our defense, my friend Beowulf, and as an office of kindness that you have come to us here”!

Wileman (2002), advocates that the full agreement of the client organization is key to the success of any plan a consultant puts forward. This does not mean a compromise of what the consultant knows is right, but does involve getting the client to agree¹⁰. As Wileman says, “the idea that consultants just rubber-stamp what management wants is naïve. We get into strong arguments with clients, and tend to stick to our guns. Part of what makes a strategy successful is the degree to which the client buys into it and actually implements it. If you have to make compromises and accept organizational realities to get that level of commitment, that in itself is part of the correct strategy, you have to make compromises and accept a pragmatic call on where the boundaries are”.

However, the Beowulf case does carry some common implementation mistakes, the major one being that there is “one-big-solution design (rather than incremental successes)”¹¹. According to Schaffer a common mistake in consulting is to bring a large, sweeping one step plan to organizations because the nature of consulting is results oriented. Schaffer contends that because the environment that the organization and the

¹⁰ Wileman, A. “Confessions of a Consultant.” *Management Today*, (August 2002): 32-37.

¹¹ Schaffer, R.H. “Looking at the 5 Fatal Flaws of Management Consulting”. *Journal for Quality and Participation* 20, 3 (June 1997): 44-54.

consultant are operating in is forever changing, an incremental plan that is continually revisited is better suited to solving an organization's problem(s).

Furthermore, Beowulf assumes that because he has solved similar problems "*Had they not seen me come from fights, where I had bound five giants*", that he can just do the same thing that he did previously and it would solve the current problem. This is also a common problem for consultants; assuming that because something worked in one situation it will work in another. Every problem situation deserves a customized solution, that concept is the very nature of management consulting according to Kubr, the ability to provide customized solutions.

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation phase is "the culmination of the consultant's and the client's joint effort", (Kubr, 221). Implementation is where "the rubber hits the road". The consultant working with the client to put into action the plan that has been agreed upon and to implement changes that are real improvements from the client's point of view is the basic purpose of any consulting assignment,(Kubur, 221). Basically, the client wants to see their problems solved and it is in the implementation phase that the consultant uses their preset plan to solve the problem.

In Beowulf this is the culminating part of the story. Beowulf waits for Grendel to arrive at the banquet hall and then with his own two hands kills him.

"He had cleansed Heorot. He who had come from afar, deep-minded, strong-hearted, had saved the hall from persecution. He was pleased with his nights work, the

deed he had done. Before the Danish people the Geat captain had made good his boast, had taken away all their unhappiness the evil menace under which they had lived, enduring it by dire constraint, no slight affliction. As a signal to all the hero hung up the hand, the arm and torn off shoulder, the entire limb, Grendel's whole grip, below the gable of the roof".

From the management consultant's perspective, Beowulf's success stems from his hands on approach. The key to a successful implementation is for the consultant to be directly involved in the implementation. "One thing that consultants rarely did well in the past was implementation. Consultants did all the design work, sometimes beautifully, then often left the task of implementation to a bunch of amateurs who generally did not know what they were doing"¹². Obviously Beowulf does not make this mistake, and kills the creature himself.

However, Beowulf's implementation develops a significant problem; Grendel's mother comes to avenge his death.

"It was declared then to men, and received by every ear, that for all this time a survivor had been living, and avenger for their foe and his grim life's-leaving: Grendel's mother herself, a monstrous ogress, was ailing for her loss".

This can be interpreted in two ways.

The first interpretation is to see Grendel's mother coming as a result of Beowulf not fully diagnosing the problem. Had he conducted a more thorough analysis he would have known in advance the Grendel's mother would "visit vengeance for her son" and she would not have "caught a man" (in other words killed one of the king's men when he thought the nightmare was over).

The king is forced to rehire Beowulf, and “reward the deed as I did before”. Beowulf travels to the beast’s home where “*the great prince went for Grendel’s mother*” he kills her in her den and the problem is finally solved. However, it cost the Danish king more money and more people than it should have.

In David Whyte’s interpretation of Beowulf as an analogy for our work life, he parallels going to get Grendel’s mother in her den to situations in our work life where we are often afraid to attack the root of our problems and miss what we should be working towards. In this sense, our lives will be unhappy, and continue to be unhappy until we get to the root, ie kill Grendel’s mother in her den.

In management consulting, Beowulf’s battle with Grendel’s mother gives credence to a point made earlier, that if the problem is not diagnosed properly the management consulting process will be a failure. Problems will continue to resurface if the root problem has not been identified and ultimately the whole consulting and change process will take longer and cost more, and probably will never be fixed.

The second interpretation is to see the coming of Grendel’s mother as being a problem that management consultant’s face when implementing a solution, that being a fear of change in the organization. Such a fear is not uncommon and one that must be considered and planned for if the management consulting process is to be a success.

The reason implementing change in an organization can be such a problem is the fact that “change is intensely personal”¹³. Therefore when Grendel’s mother is stated as “*ailing for her loss*”, this can be interpreted as the individuals in an organization feeling displaced or uncomfortable by the fact that their daily lives are being shifted in a totally

¹² Berry, J. “Consulting’s New Breed.” *Journal of Management Consulting* 9, 4 (November 1997): 42-44.

new direction. Furthermore, just as Grendel's mother is even more ferocious than the original problem of Grendel, the "battle" to overcome the resistance to change can be even more intense than developing the organization's problem solution. "For change to occur in any organization, each individual must think, feel, or do something different. Even in large organizations, which depend on thousands of employees understanding company strategies well enough to translate them into appropriate actions, leaders must win their followers one by one. Think of this as 25 000 people having conversion experiences and ending up at a predetermined place at approximately the same time. Small wonder that corporate change is such a difficult a frustrating item on virtually every company's agenda", (Duck). Therefore, to prevent Grendel's mother from reeking havoc in any consulting project it is essential to have a change management plan worked into the implementation phase.

TERMINATION

Termination is the end to any consulting project. "Every project has to be brought to an end once its purpose has been achieved and the consultant's help is no longer needed", (Kubr, 237). The consulting process ends when all the commitments have been met by the consultant and the client is satisfied that the project has been completed to their satisfaction. In Beowulf this occurs when Grendel's mother is killed and the king says to Beowulf "*Gone is the need to fear those fell attacks of former times and the lives of your earls, my lord of the Scyldings*".

For the most part the termination phase is a success for Beowulf. The client is satisfied that the job is completed, and pays him accordingly. There is a big celebration

¹³ Duck, J.D. "Managing Change: The Art of Balancing." *Harvard Business Review* November-December 1993: 109-118.

to hail Beowulf's victory, and they all leave on good terms. There is only one error in what Beowulf has done, but it is a significant one. He leaves Denmark, but does not leave the Danes with the tools to continue to do the job themselves if it should happen again. If it did happen again they would need to call back Beowulf.

To kill Grendel's mother Beowulf uses a special sword. The sword can be thought of as a special technology or skill that Beowulf possesses that is non-existent in Denmark. The sword he used to kill Grendel's mother was destroyed in the battle, it had "*made the sword dwindle into deadly icicles; the war tool wasted away*". Therefore in the real world of management consulting this can be interpreted as Beowulf finishes the job and does not offer any training or supply any new technology to insure that the Danes could fight, for themselves. This would be characterized as a management consulting failure. Kubr (237) insists that insuring that the proper tools are in place to maintain a continuity to the consultants work and ensure the client continues to reap the benefits is essential to making a termination phase successful.

CONCLUSION

What can we learn from Beowulf's consulting work? Beowulf as an analogy for the management consulting process works well to describe some effective and non-effective practices in the management consulting process. At every stage in the process there are things that management consultants can learn from Beowulf's actions.

1. Entry

-Reassure the client that you have the right skills for the job and to gain the clients confidence.

-Do not presume in advance that you know what the problem is and that you have a perfect plan to fix it.

2. Diagnosis

-Do not skip this stage entirely by presuming you already know what the problem is, and skip all the investigative work that is supposed to take place.

-Do not presume that the client possesses the necessary potential to solve the problem.

3. Action Planning

-Bring a definite plan to the client, however, be creative and consider alternatives.

-Provide a solution that is simple and easy to implement.

- Do not have a one-big-solution design.

-Do not assume because you have solved similar problems that you can just do the same thing that you did previously and it will solve the current problem.

4. Implementation

-Use a hands-on approach to achieve a successful implementation.

-Ensure proper problem diagnosis.

-Do not ignore the possibility of needing a change management plan.

5. Termination

-Ensure the client is satisfied that the job is completed to perfection, and you are paid accordingly.

-Ensure that the proper tools are in place to maintain continuity to your work and ensure the client continues to reap the benefits after you have left.

By critically reviewing Beowulf's work as, the previous list can be used as a bench mark for management consultants to judge their own work against and thus improve their performance.

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