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# Reflecting Power and Consultancy

## From Supporting Heroism to Enabling Distributed Leadership

### Abstract

Power is needed to get things done in organisations. But who should have this power? Traditionally, power is exerted by managers at the top of the organisational hierarchy. This has led to a strong focus on individual performance, a call for strong leaders showing heroic management. In this technical-practical paradigm, clients hire consultants to reduce uncertainty, longing for tools and instruments that deliver clear and immediate results. With increasing complexity of issues, and increasing interdependency of stakeholders, awareness is growing of the need for more distributed power, by involving stakeholders in strategic processes. But sharing power comes with a price. Uncertainty concerning both process and outcome increases, requiring clients to overcome the psychological barrier of putting their trust in an uncertain participative process and in the consultants they hire to facilitate this process. This article reflects on the nature of this psychological barrier and on the growing practice of leaders and consultants enabling shared leadership to discover new paths into an uncertain world.

### The Client – Consultant Relationship

Various forms of consulting (Schein, 2009) produce different forms of power and support. Edgar Schein's three reasons for someone to seek advice create three roles for consultants:

- The need for confirmation: am I doing the right things; am I looking at things the right way; do I have the right intentions?  
**The doctor role:** The consultant diagnoses and prescribes.

- The need for help to accomplish things. **The expert resource role:** The consultant provides information and/or service.
- The third is the need to enlarge the space for action, to be able to see options that we could not see before due to defensive routines. **The process consultant role:** The focus lies on communication, reflection and process creation.

In consulting practice the purpose of clarification of assignments is to find out what is actually desired from the consultancy, or at least so it is said. Frequently the client-system itself is not clear on this point. Thus consultants are usually confronted with a diversity of interests and it is often only through the process itself that it becomes known which goals should be pursued. One board member, for example, wants a strategic advice from consultants, another agrees only half-heartedly, and the rest of the board sees no need for the idea but tolerates a mutual decision in favour. It soon transpires that the board member who pushed for the consultancy had only thought of it as an instrument to be used against a colleague, wanting to prove with its help that he is on the right path with his (strategic) intentions. From the moment the consultant accepts the assignment, he/she is involved in the organisation's power network; he/she can become a tool in the power struggle or can be constantly quoted as a witness for one position or the other as well. In both cases power is allocated to the consultant but it is only an illusion of power, which severely limits every possible form of consultancy.

*What we mentioned here as a superficial phenomenon, is, however, a symptom of something deeper.*

Power is a part of the character of systems and organisations themselves and of their demarcation of borders (Luhmann, 1991). Even when there is a general wish for a consultancy, and everyone wants to "bring in someone from outside", the difference between inside and outside must be mastered; it must be declared to be positive for the development of the system. This requires a process on its own, that is, consultancy must have already begun. The dialectic of begin-

ning is unavoidable; actually the process should already “know” and be able to disclose what only later ensues.

The contradiction mentioned above consists solely of the fact that for many consultancy assignments, if they are to be successful, one needs the “power of the top”, at least for assignments that concern the whole system or its fundamental parts.<sup>1</sup> This means, however, that leaders must participate in the process, accept diagnoses and make guiding decisions. This necessary involvement is additionally unsettling, above all when much-loved identifications are put to the test through the expected changes. Conversely, every consultant knows that a refusal carries a clear message; the whole organisation knows immediately that management is not really serious.

*Consultancy operates here as a quasi-hidden, conferred power which in turn is conflicting.*

The board quickly has visions of the consultant as a “tool”, as someone who is paid to enforce their notions or serve as their alibi. Especially in times in which organisation development primarily serves to undertake personnel reductions in “appropriate” places, one cannot be surprised of this opinion.

Consultants therefore need the hidden power, but at the same time it must not be mistaken for system-internal, hierarchical power. This, too, is a balancing act, which cannot be accomplished through explanations and clarifications before the process starts. In turn, it are processes, architectures and targeted measures that master the ever-present possibility of ambivalence and bring out the true power of consultation.

Asking for and obtaining the help of a consultant is an indirect acknowledgement of loss of power. This also applies to those who only want confirmation. Simply through this, consultancy attains an intimate relationship to power, in whatever form it takes. Consul-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, strategy development, organisation development and restructuring, and merger processes.

tancy is involved in power from the outset, whether it wants to be or not. It cannot escape this involvement, because its very existence and the justification for that existence traces back to the dialectic of power.

*We are well aware that it is not unproblematic to speak of power in such a general form.*

Max Weber's definition of power also lacks differentiation: "A certain minimum of *wanting* to obey, that is, *interest* (external or internal) in obeying, is part of every leadership relationship" (Weber, 1972, p. 122). Nevertheless we wish to adhere to the hypothesis formulated above, no matter which form of power under consideration, at the same time expatiating upon several points relating to the dialectic of power. A further thesis is that power sustains itself through accepting temporary self-loss. In consultancy this becomes evident, even though it is not always reflected on as such.

### **Power Expands Possibilities**

Power and its exercise are necessary and unavoidable. Power itself, however, is dependent on the need for its use and on those over whom it is exercised. It is not there for its own sake and also not for the sake of the people or groups who are charged with it. Confusion can easily occur here, which can lead to power being decoupled from its original meaning (power loses its basis; it is set apart). Added to this, power in and of itself, individually and collectively, has something quite attractive about it, not only because of the privileges which are mostly associated with it, but for reasons which are connected to our practices of freedom. Power expands possibilities, the space of our freedom. How power and freedom are connected is another topic and we will not pursue it here.

*Power which believes it has shaken off its dependencies degenerates into directionless despotism, the opposite of a responsible practice of freedom.*

The reciprocal obedience in every exercise of power is always the concession of a certain loss of power; not until this occurs is the reality of power just. It is not always strong enough to prevent it from taking on a life of its own or becoming one-sided, as mentioned above. Therefore it is important to revive it from time to time, for which there are various measures. One of these, and far from the least significant, is consultation, which, as already mentioned, is de facto an indirect confession of a loss of power. Therefore it is no coincidence that throughout the history of leadership there are accompanying consultancy systems. The task of advisors was on the one hand to “ground” power and on the other hand to call attention to its inner contradiction; the latter was the task of court jesters, the institutionalized “devil’s advocates”, carnival and Shrovetide, during which leadership relationships are reversed. Given existing power, neither consultancy role is easy to perform. Both must juggle conformance with opposition, or at least they must not allow it to be too clear that they derive their meaning from an abdication of power. Thus even among these “classical” advisors we find the most various practices: first, those who take their business seriously and must allot it well in order not to fall from favour; second, those who, as the fawning courtiers, rather encourage the independence of power; third, those who as a shadow cabinet take over power and transfer its privileges to themselves; and finally, those who have jester’s licence—although its effect is relativized due to their own lack of power. We presume that some of these role perceptions are not unknown to us as consultants, also that the exercise of power, which always operates in the conflict between the two forms of power which are practiced, will always make consultancy necessary, as long as this cannot be taken over by the leadership itself. And there is a lot to be said for maintaining the difference.

### **Heroic Management, the Individual Power Ideology**

In consultancies we are concerned in many ways with the consequences of this individuality-power-ideology. Established power promises the “absorption of uncertainty” (Bonß and Lau, 2011).

This is what one expects of it and what makes it acceptable. Especially in crisis situations, people call for stronger leadership and usually find it, because in these situations the people who offer their services are mostly those who know how to use the situation to increase their own power. In terms of the confusion mentioned earlier, these people do not consider themselves so much as results of the psychology of the masses, but rather as individuals suited to the case. Certain forms of personality and leadership cults strengthen them in their convictions.

*Also in organisations, position power is often confused with individual ability, aptitude, leadership skills; what the leader is credited with is actually owed to the position. This is probably the source of that vanity which enriches the path to the top. It serves to compensate for a lack of self-confidence as well as trying to hide the fact that the person is not completely capable.*

This personalisation, however, has far-reaching consequences that we in consultancy constantly have to deal with. Recently they have been summarised under the term “heroic management”<sup>2</sup>. If we examine the majority of management literature, we will find them imprisoned in similar patterns of thinking, above all in those that recommend specific management practices. The numerous publications on the subject of education and training also focus on the individual, his characteristics, competences and qualifications. It is not our intention to attack individuals’ efforts to continue their education, but if one reads, for example, announcements of job vacancies for project leaders, one cannot resist having the impression that only individual universal geniuses need apply. For instance, in social competence a framework of abilities spanning conflict resolution skills through team skills to appreciation and attentiveness skills requires a human being who has probably never been born (and if so, he would be the prototype of “omnipotent”). From the outset false

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Handy first came up with this term, in his book with the striking title ‘Gods of management’ (Handy, 1991).



guides to understanding are set. The term *social* competence is already a hint meaning that it is not about the individual. It should therefore be clear that only through social behaviour, that is, by considering the respective social constellations and environment, can the competence be accomplishable. If one wants to understand the competences individually, it would mean that the particular leader is socially competent, if he succeeds in activating the existing social system in relation to the tasks and goals and in helping it to achieve the necessary, self-steering collective consciousness.

*Philosophically speaking, this means a “transcendental” turn. It relates to the creation of the conditions that enable and bring about sociality, and these are in no way personal characteristics.*

In organisation consultancy, there are clients who are hierarchically convinced of their individual capabilities and consider them as justification for their exercise of power, and, as mentioned earlier, whose expectations of the consultancy are confirmation, or more tricks and tools which allow them to continue in their perfection (Krainer and Heintel, 2010). Just the frequently asked question, “How can I motivate my employees?” should make us prick up our ears. It sets the agenda: “What do I have to do so that my employees – if possible, gladly – do what *I* want them to do?” One’s own will should in essence become directly causally effective. Here it is not always easy to reach agreement that employees also have wills of their own, at least where they should be motivated: “Causality through freedom”<sup>3</sup> is another thing than mechanistic determination.

### **Mainstream Consultancy Is Based on Expert- and Doctor-Power**

To persevere a bit longer with reference to personal consultations in connection with power: as we see it, the history of the last fifty years shows an interesting development. In the reconstruction generation after the Second World War it was not a coincidence that profes-

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<sup>3</sup> A philosophical turn by Immanuel Kant (1956).

sional consultation was either therapy aimed at “clinical” diagnosis, “private” (psychotherapy was only active in niches) or expert consultation; supervision was only conducted in its original sense, as a watchful eye being kept by mentors, line managers and agents of know-how. Therapies were associated with suffering, expert consultations served to “rectify” lacks in knowledge and gaps in instrumental know-how. Today mainstream consultancy is still active in both these fields and it can be claimed that the large consultancy firms have a technical-practical concept of consultancy that is definitely orientated on their expertise. Organisation development, process consulting, systemic-constructivist consulting, deriving in certain forms from group dynamics paradigm shifts, are still a minority offering, although they are slowly gaining ground.

This discrepancy does not so much lie in a lack of understanding of process consultancy concepts. Experience and research have proven these approaches to be successful in helping tackle a wide range of problems (Heintel, 2012; van der Zouwen 2011). The discrepancy is closely related to our subject of power, and with the habitual patterns of thinking and behaving related to it as well as with the related organizational structures and processes.

In expert/doctor consulting the situation is comparatively clear: consulting is called for when it becomes clear that something is missing for the exercise of one’s own power in some area, which limits possible courses of action or even makes taking action impossible. It may also be called for when it becomes clear that knowledge can contribute to the improvement of what exists. Limitation of action means loss of the possibility to exercise power; therefore consultancy serves to remove this limitation.

Where power structures are concerned, it is therefore a matter of interplay on an even playing field. The experts’ power results from a lack of power on the part of the “laymen”, which they can rectify to the extent that they can pass their expertise on to the clients and convince them to apply it. On both sides there appears to be agreement that this understanding of power rests on a technical-practical premise. There is knowledge that can be implemented through

direct intervention and can lead to change. The extent to which this understanding, owing to the dominance of a natural scientific-technical world-view, can be generalised to a universal concept of power cannot be pursued here. In any case, the ineradicable desire for instruments and tools that supposedly promise success if directly applied is remarkable.

In the previously mentioned connection between power and person (individual) based on hierarchical order, the technical-practical concept of power likewise appears to be a background transparency.

*The individual should be provided with handles that increase authority and influence over the organisation and which make it possible for him to intervene directly, freeing him from the previously mentioned dialectic of power. However, hierarchy as an organisational form of logical thinking is also structurally seductive; the latter is namely the method for eliminating opposition.*

We have to deal with a dimension of power that is foreign to us, who are used to thinking of power in technical-practical connections. Let us return to our earlier situation of clarification of tasks. Initially we named three dimensions of motives for which the request for consultation is decisive: confirmation, help and expansion of options. Naturally it is appropriate, as already mentioned, to ascertain the client's motives during the discussion to clarify the assignment. We have already mentioned the difficulties associated with this. Since all motives mean loss of power in various forms, and leaving the familiar inside of the system brings with it additional uncertainty, these clarifying discussions primarily serve to minimise uncertainty to standard measure. The expectation is aimed at the consultant; he should provide certainty. Loss of power on the one side projects its deficit in an expectation of power vis-à-vis the other side. In addition, the technical-practical thought pattern of the exercise of power serves as a backdrop.

Our concept and its course of action can mostly be made plausible to an open-minded counterpart, whose previous insights, one might say, thus experience a confirmation. This opens the way to

confronting uncertainty rather than having to continue to avoid or suppress it. Offers from the side of the consultant are more often accepted; they fit in with a previously developed world-view. Still, mutual “theoretical” assurances and agreements are only one side, pleasant but not sufficient. What it comes down to is the creation of a special type of trust relationship.

*Tonnie: In my training sessions on participative approaches for organisational change, experienced consultants often pose the question, ‘How do I sell a participative approach to my clients?’ The unsatisfying answer is that it cannot be sold, only bought. What I learned from Peter’s thoughts is how pervasive the technical-practical model of consulting is in consultancy practice, even in a well-intended participative process. We long for certainty and are tempted to promise more than is possible. We tend to focus on methods and tools, while establishing trust is far more important.*

## The Role of Trust in Consultancy

In recent years there has been a great deal of reflection and writing on the subject of trust, and it is noticeable that the term includes points that are quite various, even contradictory. For our subject we will zoom in on three facets of how trust generally serves to absorb uncertainty, which can be read in the work of Nicolas Luhmann (1991). In a technical-practical understanding of power relationships, it is trust *first* in the adequacy and usefulness of instruments, methods, etc. and in those experts who know how to use and control them. Analogously, trust *second* in the hierarchical order (the bond between position and individual and the confusion of the two, as previously discussed) serves to transform despotic power into an adequate power of function and organisation, so that the dialectic of power can become clear. Here trust can be interpreted as a behaviour of invoking those above; it leads to constraint of the exercise of power without regard for the person involved, and down the hierarchy as emotional agreement to the reduction of the compromising and relativizing of one’s own authority. Despite the obviously functional meaning, this type of trust illustrates an important difference

between system and person, which blurs the extremes of the functional reduction.

The *third* form of trust dispenses both with technical-practical deliverable expert security and with support of a hierarchical power regime. This third form is, however, exactly the one which we indicated earlier in connection with assignment discussions with the client. It plays a role where the said power relationships are imperilled or at least only useful in weakened form. We now maintain that this trust is on the one hand indispensable for a successful consultancy process and on the other is necessary for the special exercise of power by leaders in our organisations. It creates a bond where mutually determinative power fails and established asymmetries have lost their power to regulate. The entire world of our organisations appears to be approaching this condition; this is evidenced by “new” forms of organizing from project management to networks, by the “emancipated”, mutually dependent, differentiated system landscape; by the emergence of a “civil society”<sup>4</sup> which is politically no longer readily controllable, etc.

### **From Individual to Shared Power, the Paradox of Organisation Psychology**

It must be observed, however, that those who are convinced of themselves and their power are becoming ever fewer. This fact relates not only to tasks becoming more complex. On the individual side these tasks result in constant excessive demands, in impressions that one is no longer ready to fulfil. Declared uncertainty has arrived in positions of power, and with it that paradox of organisation psychology that brings up the question of power anew. The issue of the justification of power can to a substantial extent be satisfied with the argument of absorption of uncertainty. The latter succeeds through (clear) decisions that serve to reduce complexity. On the one hand this is necessary—it is part of the nature of decisions always having to

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<sup>4</sup> See article of Lucien van der Plaats, *Consigning public services to the people* (2013), pp. 353–371.

include and exclude—while on the other hand decisions always involve risk. Power has also been sustained because it relieves the non-powerful of risk; “trusting the system” means that one can “believe” that “the ones upstairs know what they are doing”; one can suppress the idea that “they” can never completely know this. Finally, there is the difference between calculable and incalculable risks. Complex circumstances and interdependencies increase the latter.

The clear self-doubt admitted by leaders is certainly a reason for the so-called consultancy boom, which, however, has recently weakened, because of doubt in the power of the overall system—here we mean the corporate finance system—which in individual enterprises of the real economy causes both consultancy and management to appear quite helpless. It is also decisive for a completely new situation in organisation psychology that earlier “classical hierarchies” did not know and with which we in consulting are confronted. May power doubt itself so openly, or does this rather cause damage because it hinders absorption of fear?

### **Consultancy as Door Opener to Paths into an Uncertain World**

Power relationships are necessary and when they do not degenerate into despotism, when they accept their internal dialectic, they also confirm the sense of this necessity. As such they provide order from and in their security. Earlier we also claimed that there is a form of power which in contrast to those characterised above confronts us indefinitely. This power already has many names: nemesis, fate, coincidence, future; ultimately the traditional concept of God, despite all attempts to grasp it concretely, to “humanise” it, must also be included in this indeterminacy. We cannot deal further with these powers of fortune here. It is probably, however, that all of our performances of power serve to transform the indeterminate power into a determinable one. In our context it is important to observe where this indeterminate power establishes itself, in order to return to the “depths” of consultancy.

To utilise consultancy means agreeing to a loss of power in existing connections; in extreme cases surrendering oneself, losing power, opening a door to the unknown and indeterminate, to make one-

self visible to a power which divests us of our accustomed and ordinary forms of use. Crossing this threshold is connected with fear, but in “the other world” there is no reason for this. Consultancy is only a door opener; perhaps it also illuminates paths, which promise practicability in uncertainty. It cannot take over the transfer of power, which is actually desired (we spoke of “hidden” power) because it does not know what new landscapes are waiting on the other side of the door. It can promise to try to help to bring the unknown into view, to support the client. But the consultant does not have the power, if possible already in advance, to create certainty out of uncertainty.

So on the one hand, consultancy creates a power vacuum; on the other it illustrates power, which both sides are at the mercy of, which abandons mutually exercised power. To illustrate this situation with an analogy to an everyday example: partnership, love, and friendship can be formed and confirmed by the use of known power mechanisms. Partly this cannot be gotten around. Attempts of this type, however, flee from that which is the “substance” of these relationships, namely exposed power and thus entry into uncertainty. This uncertainty cannot be mastered through mutual exercise of power; it remains, together with the fear of it; it is the price of mutually respected freedom.

### **Looking for Common Ground, Postponing Personal Gains**

But what does this freedom imply? How can one gain security without exercising power? As fine and desirable as mutually respected freedom may be, its shadow side is uncertainty. Fear is the price of freedom (Heintel, 2012).

Surrender to the power of uncertainty cannot be a permanent condition; it would lead to paralysis of the ability to act or to kismet-like resignation to fate. But what makes insecurity and uncertainty endurable and takes away their power? If mutual exercise of power is relinquished, one obviously needs a third party to bind the two sides together. This is also a place for the type of trust, which is neither directed toward experts nor systems, nor is it downplayed

through the invocation of hierarchical power. It is something that unites and binds us because it becomes a mutual fate; the latter is probably also the reason for human cooperation (de Waal, 2005). Our functional, unemotional era tried to reduce this trust in the expectation of a mutual advantage, a give and take. The weighing of advantages, however, easily becomes something, which is subjectively felt. For us the reverse of trust is the *requirement* of weighing advantages, this is not the prerequisite, but the basis, which allows us to gain a foothold in uncertain terrain without having to stalk each other.

Consultancy in the form which we intend, which cannot help but engages with this uncertainty and at the same time does not wish to lead the client into nirvana nor into disorientation, must make use of “hidden” power to co-create a third party as a basis who’s power is equally relevant for both sides. Trust is an emotional expression but it cannot be directly intended.

*A well-performed multi stakeholder process has ‘essentially by-products’, such as increase of trust, awareness, engagement and responsibility of participants. The term ‘essentially by-products’ was coined by Jon Elster (1983), and refers to products you want but cannot enforce; their pursuit is doomed to failure by the pursuit itself. For example: imagine what would happen if a consultant says to participants “I want you to trust me”.*

There are of course confidence-building measures, but whether they are effective is not certain from the outset. Trust is a self-developing, delicate cocoon, and often initially only an intuitive feeling, the evidence, which is difficult to determine (Backer and Kluge, 2003). What can be identified later and with the benefit of hindsight, as mutual stage, was, at the beginning, quite empty, vague, an image of indeterminacy which one has let oneself in for. In the end it can be said that trust is (or arises from) uncertainty, which has become mutual and arises from the manifest good will to take away one’s power without having to overpower each other.

The greatest challenge for leaders in any change lies in finding the right balance between maintaining a clear direction and inviting



active participation. A carefully designed participative process, for instance with large-scale interventions, provides opportunities for finding this balance in interaction by inviting self-management and personal responsibility for action during and after the process.

*Tonnie van der Zouwen (2011) developed an evidence based practical guide for participative processes, comparable to Client Information Leaflets for medical treatments and financial products. For leaders, we also recommend the book with the striking title 'You don't have to do it alone; how to involve others to get things done' (Axelrod et al., 2004).*

### **Accepting the Power of Uncertainty, Involving Stakeholders in a Co-Production**

Process consulting, involving people with a stake in the issue at hand, differs from the other roles in two significant factors: first, an acceptance of the power of uncertainty, and second, a form of freedom which everyone involved shares mutually and which in collective deposit forms the “self” of the system (Heintel, 1992). In this sense consultants are actually experts in not knowing (in that which in principle is not knowable beforehand), but with it they make room for that freedom which otherwise in predetermined power relationships has always been missing. This uncertainty cannot be mastered through mutual exercise of power. Power and leadership are distributed among stakeholders; however, final decision-making mostly remains in the hands of formal leaders. According to Marvin Weisbord (2012), this requires from the participants in the process openness to uncertainty and the possibility of failure, an ability to look at an analysis or solution of a complex situation from multiple perspectives, and a willingness to avoid a rigid approach for action.

Understanding multi-stakeholder challenges, applying process consulting and group dynamic principles to deal with complex issues, and how to collaborate for success by sharing power in carefully balanced processes where leadership roles are more distributed in the system. This enables large groups of people to work together in finding common ground and take responsibility for action. This

opens doors to creative new opportunities, helps to bring the unknown into view, and finding paths in uncertain and fast-changing situations.

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