Know what I mean? Nudge, nudge, wink, wink…
The implications of linguistic variance in knowledge management on the client-consulting relationship.

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Introduction

In his article "Questions for the Corporate Soul", Crainer (2001) sets out the task facing the consultant in approaching an organization for the first time and deliberates on "what is the most important question that you need to ask?" Amongst a variety of replies that reflect the core interests of the gurus interviewed, Leif Edvinsson asks "Where is your intellectual capital and how efficient is it?" (reflecting, as we shall see, the focus of interest in knowledge management in the financial services sector).

In fact consultancy firms are promoters and users of knowledge management (KM) practices (Dunford, 2000). However, Dunford makes some critical observations concerning consultancy practices in KM and draws our attention to a number of points of which two are particularly relevant to this paper.

1. "effective diagnosis precedes the use of the tools because:

   … the most effective analytical tool will not overcome confused understanding of client objectives, nor will "world class" systems overcome incompetent client management, confused and misaligned organization, or unresolved disagreement on strategic direction (Pringle, 1998, p. 5)."

The corrupted language of organizations' "bureaucratese" was addressed by Watson (1997) in his review of Wittgenstein on language. The clarification of meaning ascribed to client language (or any conversation) is therefore an important consideration for the consultant.

2. "staff should be trained in diagnostic skills that allow them to make an informed assessment of the critical factors in a given client's situation."

These two points raise crucial questions concerning the language used during consultancy, the processes of communication and the way in which questions are phrased. Beginning with a representation of the contribution of language to organizational knowledge and culture, this paper proceeds with the modality of knowledge exchange during the consultancy process. Taking the key points raised by Dunford, the importance of the initial dialogue between client and consultant is examined in the light of the reported requirements of clients (Clark, 1995).

Initial discussion with a client should reveal indications of the organizational culture and the preferred language terms relevant to the client's understanding of "knowledge management". The key language terms used in different commercial sectors, taken from a study undertaken by the author during 2001, are listed. From the basis of client need, the consultant is then able to probe client requirement to understand the problem and to decide whether they are able to offer services to the client, using client language terms.

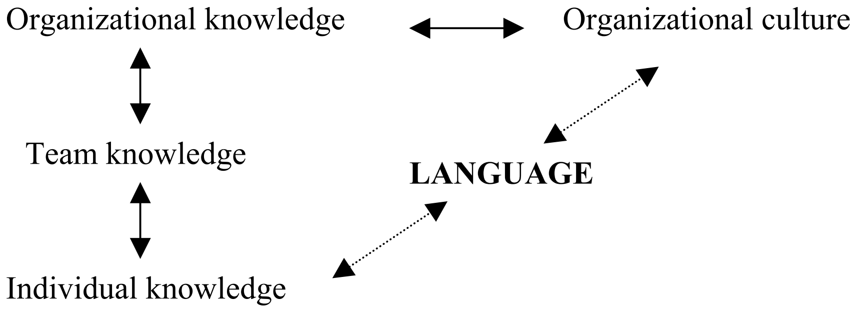
Finally, a process of active listening, tacit and explicit knowledge transfer, and correct use of preferred language terms combined with selection of appropriate tools and techniques is proposed as a consultancy model.

The paper is influenced by a cognitive perspective and takes note of the systematic and transformational representations of language (Chomsky, 1986 and 1991) in developing a framework for consultancy.

Language, Learning, Knowledge and Culture

Language is difficult to define (Greene & Coulson, 1995) and describes a wide variety of communication means. Language in organizations is considered to be a primary means of communication, where people are brought together for a purpose and engage in dialogue to make sense of their purpose (Dixon, 1998). Language is an important part of the social glue that binds organizations together (and pulls them apart) and has been widely associated with the definition of culture within an organization (Bate, 1990; Hall, 1914/1990; Pinker, 1994; Rose Charvet,1997, p.46). Language is the personal medium through which we convey information and I contend that we process information, sometimes through learning, to derive knowledge. It is the way that we process information and make sense of it that determines our knowledge or lack of it. Language is therefore an important forerunner to knowledge and is highly influential.

From the above, it is evident that individual knowledge is conveyed through the dialogue of organizations and becomes established in team and organizational knowledge. Language is consequently an important predicate for organizational knowledge and in the management of it.



The importance of conversation in KM was discussed some time ago (Roos & von Krogh, 1995) and exemplified by the statement "the currency of knowledge development is language". This paper builds on the language relationship and goes further to look at the interface between the organization and a consultant but before this can be explained, the process of consultancy must be presented.

Consultancy and knowledge

Consultancy, like knowledge, has been around since the beginning of society and yet did not receive great attention until the management of organizations and Taylorism came under scrutiny. The purpose of this paper is not to expound on consultancy but to specifically consider the implications of language during the knowledge transfers that occur between client and consultant.

The word language in the context of this paper is used in the broadest sense to cover many aspects of communication and is sometimes referred to as body language. The Association for Project Management refers to over 150 forms of body language used in communications between humans, in their reference text the "Body of Knowledge". It is apparent then that we should not assume that conversation alone will influence the client. In truth, it may be a nod, a wink or something similar that conveys more meaning than an hour's talking. So how important is talking?

In "The new Dream dictionary" (Crisp, 1994), the results of a survey indicated the top 6 words most regularly used in describing dreams were

1) Seeing

2) Feeling

3) Talking

4) Thinking

5) Trying

6) Knowing

As a means of communication, it would appear that talking features highly in our dreams. It is also fascinating to note that of the 18 words categorized, 12 are participles that end in "ing", an ending that is frequently but not always associated with action or progress.

In studies of language (Williams, 2002), it has become apparent that the progressive form is distinguished from the non-progressive form in expressing "susceptibility to change". Clearly both consultant and client are concerned with change and therefore progressive language should be pre-eminent in client-consultant dialogue. In this sense the language of dreams may be reflecting our scenarios (a consultancy tool) for change, and embodies a little utilised dimension of consultancy.

Dreams operate in the subconscious and come to the surface for most of us when our mind becomes unoccupied with other thoughts. They are also measurable phenomena as electrographs of brain activity demonstrate. Apart from their existence we also know that the language of dreams is couched in imagery, allegory, drama, suggestion, word play and innuendo (Crisp, 1994, p.238). A rich source of material for the consultant if it could be made accessible but first we must consider the consultancy process to understand why and where language is important.

Simplistically, the consultancy process has been described as "***Getting in", "Doing the work"*** and ***"Getting Out"*** (Tranfield & Smith, 1991). These simple expressions allow us to focus on the content of each stage and in particular to reflect on potential knowledge flows.

"***Getting in***

During the "getting-in" phase, the consultant makes contact with the client, discusses "the problem" the client is concerned with and if interested negotiates a contract with the client. These meetings may be at the request of the consultant or the client, and usually result in a meeting of the consultant(s) with leading members of the organization. Herein lies the first task for the consultant, that of determining the identity of the "client" - the person with the authority to contract the work. Indeed, the initial contact is infrequently the client and much time may be taken up with "preparing the way". This can be a difficult time for both the client and the consultant as an understanding of the nature of the task has to be made clear and understood by both parties. These tensions have been well described (Neumann, 1994) but hopefully result in a psychological contract between the two parties. However, it is the nature of the communications exchange between the client and consultant and consideration of the respective knowledge flows that is of interest here.

During this time, the consultant and the client are searching for knowledge of a variety of issues. It is usually more than information that is needed. It is insight into the ways of working and track record in similar circumstances that are sought amongst other things. By its very nature this knowledge is contextual and affected by time (what was relevant 5 years ago may not be today) and the knowledge flows tend to be of a tacit form possibly supported by explicit. These terms for invisible or intangible knowledge (tacit) and the overtly available (explicit) knowledge are two of the most accepted knowledge descriptors whilst also accepting that other definitions exist or may be viewed as more appropriate.

The tacit elements from the client perspective may involve insight into the way "the problem" has developed, the personalities of individuals involved, the culture of the organization and influencing (power) relationships to name but a few examples. The client may also support this with documents such as an annual report, relevant publications, letters, performance indicators, market analyses or proposals, all of which can be considered to represent explicit knowledge.

The consultant, in discussing the client issues, may refer to other relevant work or analogies that will help to assure the client of their knowledge of the subject area and their capability to engage in consultancy to resolve the client's problem. Explicit information could include a brochure of consultancy services or specific flyers, a presentation, publication or report on the subject.

The tacit knowledge exchanges, however, are the most influential at the stage of "getting-in" as there are many more messages being transferred and received than we are aware of. **Consequently it follows that the value to both parties of reflecting on the meeting, before deciding on a contract, is useful in allowing time for the messages to be appreciated, considered and clarified if necessary. This is a key**

point for those that engage in consultancy and is the first recommendation of this paper.

"Doing the work"

"Doing the work" involves diagnosis of the problem, analysis of the findings and planning interventions where necessary. Having negotiated a contract to perform services for the client, the consultant must then engage in gathering data / information / knowledge to help diagnose the problem. Typically this involves dialogue with a variety of employees that may include the client but usually involves many people within the organization.

Knowledge exchange is typically a mixture of tacit and explicit although there is a tendency to focus on the explicit as demonstrable fact whilst more subjective but frequently valaubale opinion is gathered from "interviews" of one form or another. Increasingly there is a tendency for the consultant to work with groups (time and cost efficient) and this contributes greatly to "shared understanding". This may be a cathartic experience for some involved, as multi-disciplinary group gatherings to discuss group perception rather than individual perception are infrequent.

It is during the diagnosis stage that the consultant has to exhibit exceptional listening and other skills to sift through the morass of background information whilst in search of knowledge about the firm. There is a natural tendency for client representatives to be reluctant to engage with the consultant due to confidentiality, personal power and knowledge relationships, and the "external" perception of the consultant. The consultant, therefore, has much to contend with and needs skills that assist client personnel with this exchange**. It is paying attention to this dialogue that is the next recommendation of this paper** and will be explained in more detail later.

"Getting Out"

Getting out describes the state where the consultant implements recommendations made to the client and wishes to leave on favourable terms such that they may be re-engaged if appropriate in the future and be referred elsewhere by the client.

The consultant typically makes their knowledge explicit so that the organization can visualise and benefit from their work. By this stage, a bond between the client and the consultant has been established and a consensus has formed on the way forward, at least in the immediate future. Consequently there is, or should be, a confluence of knowledge between the client and the consultant. There may also be a re-positioning of the relationship that is frequently strengthened if the work has been successful but may terminate if objectives have not been fulfilled.

As a generalisation, it seems evident that the consultancy process sees a shift in emphasis from tacit to explicit knowledge as consultancy progresses to closure. In many ways there are parallels with the sales process in which the salesperson advises the customer on the most appropriate product or service for their needs. However, there have been many instances of over-zealous selling (e.g. independent financial advice) and more rigorous controls are needed.

The consulting industry has also been effected by recent scandals regarding the advisory services of the largest consulting firms in the world, which suggest that there is room for improvement. The introduction of Codes of Conduct by the Institute of Management Consultants and the recognition of chartered status may improve matters, but what practical measures can be introduced to reduce the risk of client dissatisfaction?

What the client is looking for

From data gathered over several years, Clark (1995) assembled the following list of client requisites.

Words such as values, reputation, accomplishment, credibility, and authenticity tell us something about the ethics and expectations of the consultant by the client. It is also evident that authoritative knowledge and the ability to solve the client's problem are highly sought after.

Values	Accomplishment	Experience
Reputation	Expertise	Wisdom
Vision	Products	Personality
Friendship	Information	Style
Approval	Equipment	Guts
Support	Credibility	Authenticity
Contact	An answer	Perspective
	Time	Objectivity
	Insight	Compassion
	A problem taken away	
	A solution	

Consultancy can therefore be considered to be an ethical process by which a consultant's knowledge is employed to effectively resolve a client's problem.

So what is this ethical process? **In this paper, attention is drawn to the importance of client language and terminology in the client-consultant relationship and forms the third recommendation.**

The terminology of Knowledge Management

Between 1983 and 1997, the ABI / Inform database recorded the following terms related to knowledge management (Raub & Ruling, 2000);

Generic KM processes,

HR implications,

Intellectual capital,

KM / IT tools,

Organizational implications,

Strategic implications.

In a more recent review, Murray (2000) refers to the following phrases having connection with knowledge management;

Competency modeling,

Corporate memory / institutional memory,

Distance learning,

Information economics / mining,

Intellectual assets / capital,

Knowledge acquisition / mining / base / maps and mapping,

Learning organization / knowledge creating organization.

The increasing variety of terms confirms the continued interest in knowledge management during the late 1990's. In particular, there was a fracturing of knowledge terms and stronger association with learning. During 2001, we conducted our own research into the terminology and application of knowledge management across the major commercial sectors in Europe. We found further evidence of continuing "terminology development" expressed as;

Artificial Intelligence,

Best practice,

Capabilities catalog,

Communities,

Content management,

Corporate wisdom,

Customer relationship management,

Data mining / processing,

Document management,

Expert Systems,

Information Management,

Innovation,

Intellectual Capital / property,

Intranet management,

Knowledge based systems and engineering / capture / fairs / solutions , Knowledge map / mapping / networks / strategy, Sector knowledge,

Know-how,

Learning / Learning Organization / lessons learnt,

Network communities,

Networking,

Risk management,

The terms presented were elicited from replies to a structured questionnaire on the management of knowledge and through telephone interviews with respondents. The terms represent consistent themes in language and are not represented as statistics. Our study indicates further depiction of knowledge management and evidence of application in a variety of ways in different commercial sectors. It is also apparent that knowledge is correctly seen as something more valuable than information alone.

"Artificial Intelligence", "Knowledge based systems" and "Intellectual capital" in financial services promotes the notion of applied cerebral knowledge. The use of "data mining" and "lessons learnt" from customer claims helps to formulate "Risk Management", a core function of the insurance business. However, the whole financial services industry is aware of the need for " innovation" to prevent stagnation and to maintain competitive edge.

In the pharmaceutical industry, where pressures on drug discovery and protection are intense, "Document management", "Innovation", "Intellectual Property", take the lead. Leadership is evidenced through the use of "Corporate wisdom". However, the methodologies in use are apparent in the use of "knowledge fairs" and "networked communities".

The engineering sectors are focused on "best practice" to retain competitive edge and it is no surprise that they refer to "knowledge based engineering". However, there was also evidence of attempts to understand the knowledge resources available - "knowledge map", "capabilities catalog".
Several service industries have turned their attention to "Customer Relationship Management" as a way of building on existing business through the application of knowledge about customers during dialogue with their customers.

Large organizations are turning to "Communities" as a way of retaining focus on core issues and providing a sense of connection, collaboration and collectivity. Electronic connectivity through the internet and intranets continues and this has resulted in the necessity for "Content management". A new form of information management?

Not surprisingly employees working within these sectors meet and discuss mutual concerns and industry practice. This dialogue develops a sectoral language that in turn formulates an identifiable sectoral culture and core knowledge. It is these languages that the consultant must learn and use to correctly communicate with the client. **The fourth recommendation is that the consultant must listen to the language of the client and use it without contaminating the meaning, to deliver or acquire knowledge.**

A consulting model

From the preceding evidence and discussion, it is apparent that organizational knowledge is derived through the language and culture of the organization. For the consultant to tap into the knowledge of a client organization, it is contended here that the consultant must use familiar language within the organization to ensure transference of meaning and knowledge. This is particularly important to the knowledge management consultant who is brought in to resolve a problem related to organizational knowledge, a precious commodity to the client (Edwards & Kidd,2000).

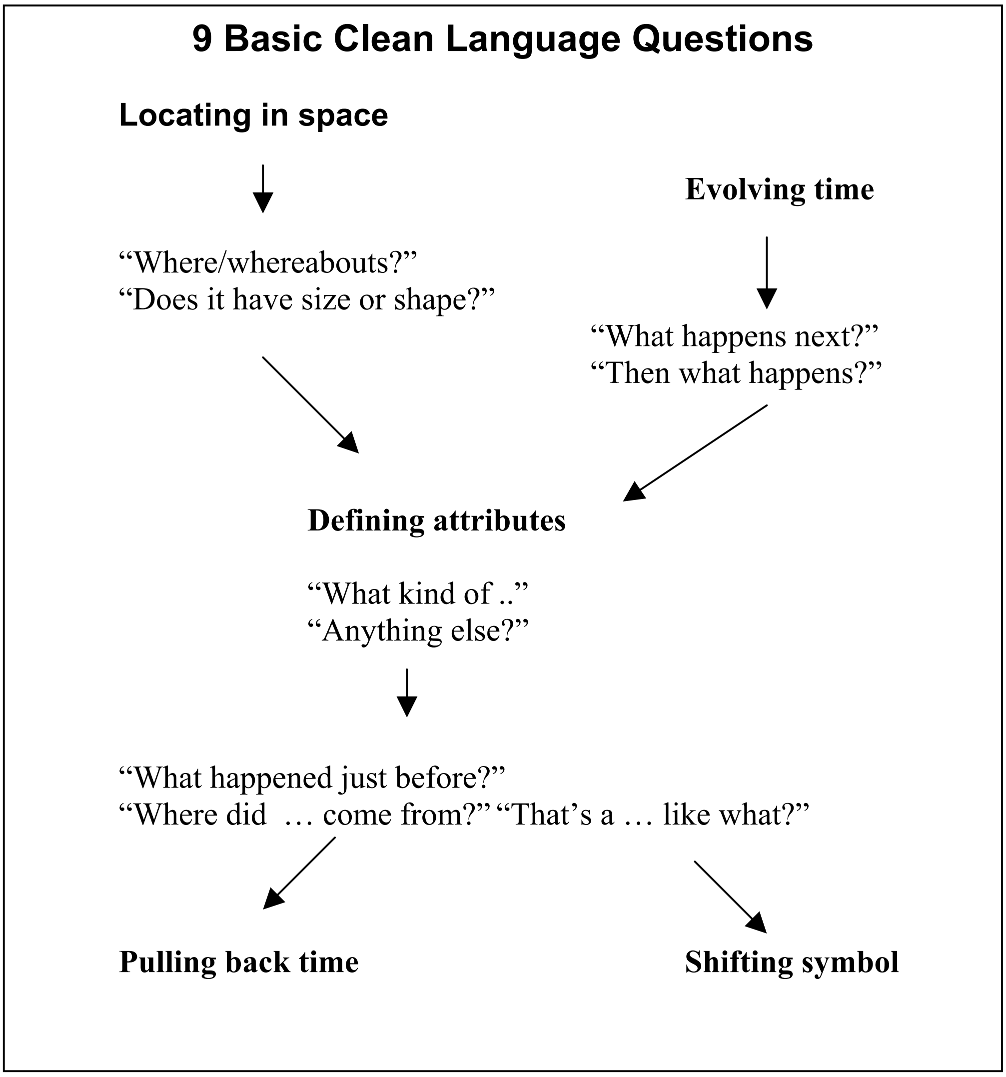
The evidence for the effectiveness of using client language lies in the literature of therapists (Tompkins & Lawley, 2000) who, through modelling of the responses of their patients, discovered a language pattern that uncovered deep held thoughts and beliefs. This linguistic approach was named "Clean Language" (Fig. 1) in deference to the minimalist interference of the interviewer, and was identified by David Grove. His methodology, grounded in symbolic modelling, enables the respondent to find his or her own means of expression. The language of the respondent is frequently found to contain metaphors that in themselves convey considerable information that can be explored.

"*Metaphors both describe and constitute reality - meanings we attribute to events and influence action we take*" (Tsoukas, 1991).

Unlike conventional interviews, a commonly used technique favoured by consultants, symbolic modelling retains focus on the key terms used by the client and successively delves deeper into the recesses of the mind.

My own work into the application of the model to assess access to tacit knowledge initially elicited mixed results. Although interviewees admitted to revealing things they "did not know" or had not admitted previously, the process was laborious and linguistically difficult to accomplish. On several occasions this resulted in requests for clarification of meaning or blank expression.

Fig. 1 - Clean Language



I have concluded that the attempt to migrate a linguistic approach from a therapeutic application into business is at least difficult, if not impossible if the model is strictly applied. What is more important is the ability of the interviewer to engage in dialogue that uses the respondent's language and retains subject focus. The application of time frames is also helpful and is evidential of the contextual (time and place) nature of knowledge.

How and when should "clean language" be used by consultants?

As stated already, clean language questions need to be phrased around the language of the client whilst paying attention to the sector terms for knowledge management described earlier. Clean language is ideally suited to the retrieval of tacit knowledge by the client, facilitated by the consultant. The most important applications being;

a) to understand the nature of the client's problem whilst "getting in" and

b) in diagnosing the issues influencing the client problem through interviews with key personnel during "doing the work".

What other methods are valuable to the knowledge management consultant?

<u>Storytelling</u> has received much attention in knowledge management consultancy, mostly for good reasons. A primary reason for the success is the ability of the storyteller to use organizational language (and represent the culture) and to make sense of events and actions in terms widely recognised by employees, in the form of a story. The metaphorical nature of stories allows images held in the mind to be re-framed as the story develops. As with the case of "clean language", those that

interfere with the meaning by implanting their own terms do so at the peril of themselves and the organization.

Whilst storytelling also has strong tacit dimensions, it also has the ability to reach an ending and is certainly valuable in the "doing work" and "getting out" phases of consultancy. Engaging examples are given by Orr (in Choo, 1998, p.123) and Tangherlini (2000).

Semiotic and discourse analysis

Marlene Fiol (1990) gives an account of how to use *narrative semiotics* (the study of signs) in the business world although I have found few references to its application to knowledge management issues. However, *discourse analysis* has been applied (Raub & Ruling, 2000) to "challenge some of the currently held assumptions regarding the nature, triggers and rhetoric of management fashion".

In both cases significant effort is required to make sense of the texts and there is inevitably some subjectivity in making an assessment of meaning. Significant effort is required in reading the texts, in understanding the texts and then analyzing the findings, all of which is time consuming. For these reasons it is difficult to see consultants regarding semiotic and discourse analysis as resource efficient diagnostic methods. They can, however, deliver deep insight into organizational culture and knowledge, particularly for those engaged in research. Application of these methods to annual reports, performance reviews, media publications when "getting-in" and "doing work" may be very illuminating. The very nature of these methods means that they deal exclusively with explicit knowledge.

Learning from dialogue

Nancy Dixon has done much to advance the notion of dialogue as a means of understanding and bringing about change in organizations. In "Dialogue at Work" (1998) she takes us through five approaches (contributed by Argyris, Bohm, Mezirow, Johnson & Johnson, and Freire) to discourse analysis of organizations.

These methods may be used with individuals but are mostly intended for working with groups and are valuable as such. They examine reasoning and meaning-making and may use the consultant as a facilitator to check reasoning. Argyris in particular uses dialogue to make viewpoints clear and substantiable. As before, the consultant must be aware of implanting their own views on the client whilst gathering knowledge.

Discourse may therefore be used throughout the consultancy process but is most likely to be used during the "doing the work" phase. Although they may be used to gain insight into explicit knowledge (a product of learning) the methods are arguably of more value in surfacing tacit knowledge and doing this in a transparent way with groups.

Critical hermeneutics

This method regards organizational communication as symbolic phenomena and texts that require interpretation, the theory and practice of which is called hermeneutics. The method is critical in that it requires self-conscious reflection on organizational culture and management (Phillips et al, 1993).

The three pronged approach examines

1) the symbolic phenomena in an organization

2) a structured method for analyzing texts

3) a framework for the inclusion of other methods of linguistic analysis (e.g. semiotics and discourse analysis)

As with discourse analysis, this method is well suited to research and provides an informative and introspective view of organizations. However, it is also equally laborious from the consultancy perspective and is unlikely to be widely adopted except by expert practitioners. The combination of methods enables both tacit and explicit knowledge transfers making it useful for both "getting-in" and "doing the work".

Divination

In an interesting paper on divination as a way of knowing (Tedlock, 2001), we are made aware of this technique for exploring the unknown.

"*Questions about future events, past disasters whose causes cannot be explained, things unknown and hidden from sight or removed in space, appropriate conduct in critical situations.....and making choices of persons for particular tasks - all these are common subjects of divinatory enquiry*".

With such a pedigree it would seem foolish to overlook the potential to engage with things hidden from sight that may be highly appropriate to understanding tacit knowledge. As such this may form another aspect of the consultant's techniques when "getting-in" and "doing the work". The following figure summarises the a matrix of consultancy techniques for the exchange of knowledge flows.

Fig. 2 - Language interventions for consultancy

Consultancy stages	Consultancy methods	Consultancy methods	Consultancy methods
Getting in	Clean language	SDA CH	Divination
Doing the work	Clean language	SDA. CH. Storytelling	Divination LFD
Getting out		Storytelling	LFD

SDA - Semiotic and Discourse analysis

LFD - Learning from dialogue

CH - Critical hermeneutics

Summary

Consideration of the initial question posed by Crainer points to the more specific enquiry confronting consultants "what should we ask questions about?" As Dunford tells us, diagnosis is critically important if consultants are to be successful and it is only through enquiry that consultants find answers. So how should the enquiry be conducted?

Having made the link from language to organizational knowledge via cultural communications, the importance of language in the consultant's knowledge work is emphasized. The transformation from the use of tacit to explicit knowledge in following the consultancy process enables the consultant to devise strategies for effective communication. The relationship with the client can be enhanced throughout the process and maximizes the knowledge flows when attention is paid to the language and techniques available. The particular stresses of the initial meetings between client and consultant necessitate a period of reflection to learn about the client problem and for both parties to decide if the relationship will work. At these early meetings it is critically important to focus on the language used to describe the client's view of knowledge issues. As there is a developing lexicon of terms for knowledge management activities, the consultant needs to be aware of sectoral language preferences.

The methodologies proposed for tackling knowledge management consultancy are compared against the need for tacit or explicit knowledge transfer and their respective merits.

In writing this paper and sharing my own knowledge, it is evident that greater attention to the use of language is needed to improve the standard and efficiency of consultancy in knowledge management. I commend attention to language to those of you involved in consultancy.

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