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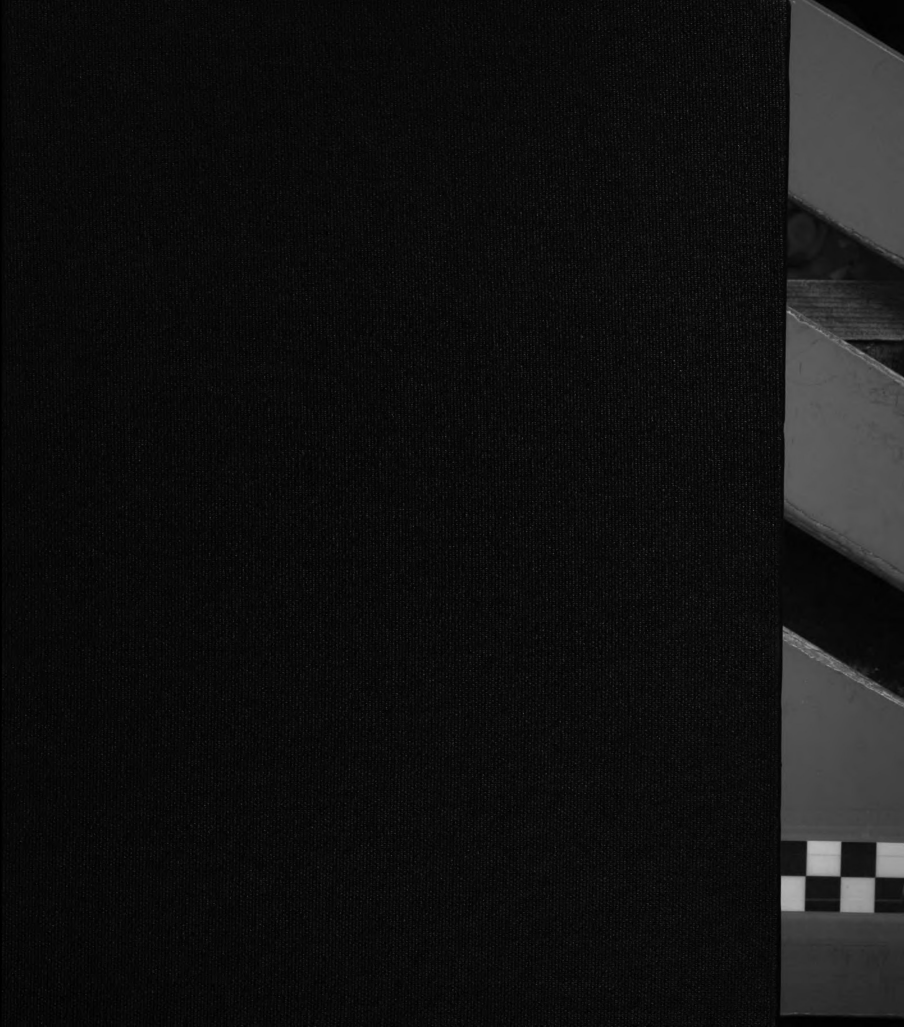
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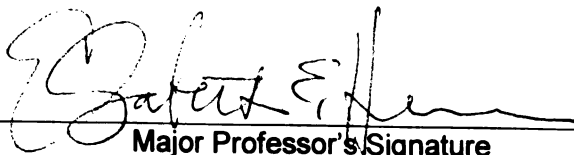
**A STUDY OF COMMENDABLE SCHOOL REFORM  
CONSULTANTS**

presented by

**ILENE MAE SACHELL**

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**A STUDY OF COMMENDABLE SCHOOL REFORM CONSULTANTS**

**VOLUME I**

**By**

**Ilene Mae Satchell**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
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## ABSTRACT

### A STUDY OF SCHOOL REFORM CONSULTANTS.

By

Ilene Mae Satchell

The purpose of this study was to investigate K-12 school consultants' perceptions of schooling and consulting methods best suited to supporting school reform. It sought to illuminate commendable consulting practice and to heighten educators' awareness of consulting as a valuable school improvement resource.

Through narrative interviews and shadowing, this study investigated five external school reform consultants and the temporary partnerships they form with high needs schools. It centered upon exemplary consultants, known for their exceptional skill and efficacy, as consistent pivotal actors amidst continuously emerging client school change.

Findings were reported in five areas: (1) consultants' beliefs about school-consultant partnerships, (2) schooling factors that impact consultants' efficacy, (3) roles consultants play to fulfill their commitment to client schools, (4) consulting methods they employ, and (5) the essence of exemplary consultants.

This study holds implications for consultants and educators pursuing school reform. It reveals consultants' acknowledgement that power to change schools rest ultimately with administrators and teachers and urges school leaders to manifest their commitment to reform initiatives through steadfast, visible collaboration with consultants. It proposes that this research be followed by additional study of school-consultant partnerships from the views of school leaders and teachers as well as consultants.

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2006

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to  
my daughters Amy and Sarah, my sons Erin and Ryan,  
and  
the four sons and daughters they added to our family  
Bryan, Korey, Michelle, and Jeni  
who enthusiastically supported my decision to pursue a doctoral degree  
and showed unfailing interest in my progress.

They commiserated with me during the difficult times  
without ever suggesting that I quit.  
They celebrated my achievement while letting me know that  
nothing tops my role as mom and grandma.

Thank you all.

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Finally, I wish to thank Professor Robert Meadows from Saginaw Valley State University whose deep dedication to schools and educators inspires me to do what I can for school improvement. His story telling is infused with sentiment identical to that expressed by the consultants whom I studied who declared, "It's all about the kids!"



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

K-12 educational consulting occurs within the greater field of organization change—a field whose literature abounds with terms describing endeavors that generate client-consultant partnerships: *development* (Burke, 1994); *innovation* (Hage, 1999; Vidaver-Cohen, 1998); *intervention* (Argyris, 1970); and *reform* (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Goens & Clover, 1991; Hill & Harvey, 2004). As these terms imply, the breadth and depth of organization change generated through school-consultant partnerships may vary from one pairing to another; nevertheless, change remains a consistent factor. Understanding of organization change, therefore, undergirds study of work performed by educational consultants.

This study melds examination of organization change research with field research of commendable K-12 consultants. It is my hope that by prefacing my study's interview and observation findings with a brief review of organization change literature, this paper will deepen not only understanding of skills exercised by talented consultants, but also awareness of local school factors that may impact consultants' opportunity to actualize lasting school-wide organization change.

### Consultants: Who They Are and What They Do

Consultants like the ones studied through my research are known as external school improvement consultants. This means that although they may contract with a school district to provide services, they do not become permanent

members of their clients' school staffs. In some cases the time allotted for their association is clearly delineated. Consultants working for a model provider (an organization offering one particular school improvement program) will agree to remain connected to a client school for the number of months or years designated in their models' plans. There are, however, situations in which time is not such a pre-determined factor. When, for example, a state department of education sends a consulting employee to a school in need of technical support the duration of this new school-consultant partnership is less predictable and varies in correlation to the school's need and capacity for change.

School-consultant partnerships should not be viewed as homogeneous in nature or purpose. This truth affirms change as a fundamental feature of consultants' everyday reality. The consultant expects his enacted behavior to be duplicated by school staff members to such an extent that task mastery and repeatability are achieved. Consultants attempt to infuse clients with capacity to continue similar tasks well beyond the duration of the school-consultant partnership. Consultants accomplish this by functioning as teachers, continually explaining and modeling behaviors that they want administrators and teachers to learn to do for themselves.

Although specific tasks performed by the consultants will vary, they can, for the most part, be understood as fitting into four categories: (1) analysis, (2) planning, (3) implementation, and (4) evaluation. Brief descriptions of these categories, will be followed by exceptions that will affirm the ever changing nature of consultants' work. One of the first tasks performed for new client

schools is research. Consultants often ask leaders to produce school culture and student achievement data, whereupon, they analyze it together. If data is unavailable, then the consultant shows administrators and teachers how to gather data and when necessary provides appropriate tools such as survey instruments. Once substantial data are at hand consultants teach staff members to analyze it and to carry analysis into the second category of consultant function—planning. Consultants meet with district and building level leaders to develop schools' action plans. It should be understood, however, that the consultants do not simply engage in closed door meetings where all decisions are made by leaders. Instead, they show administrators and teacher leaders how to elicit input from classroom teachers. In this way the planning stage prepares the way for the third stage—implementation during which mentoring and modeling predominate. Some mentoring occurs behind closed doors as when a consultant and principal talk about work that the staff attempted between visits or when a consultant shows leadership team members how to coach teachers who are learning new methods. Although listed as the fourth stage, evaluation actually occurs continuously throughout the school-consultant partnership. Very early consultants evaluate principals' and improvement teams' capacity to analyze their schools' situations. As the working relationship progresses, consultants teach them to pause at each implementation step to analyze progress. Finally, they teach clients to evaluate their post-partnership needs and their capacity to move forward independent of consultant support.

As I mentioned earlier, all partnerships that consultants enter into do not embody the four categories listed above. Three variances create exceptions: (a) the consulting venue, (b) the client's purpose, and (c) time available. All consulting function does not take place in school buildings where principals and teacher leaders can be mentored in their normal work environment. Multi-session training courses may be held off-site. Although consultants might, in this setting, model advisor behaviors, they essentially lecture and lead discussions. The stated purpose of the client with whom the consultant contracts also defines the consultant's tasks. For example, when the purpose is grant compliance, the consultant focuses narrowly upon accurate application completion and appropriate fund usage. With administrators and teacher team members she carefully examines every detail of applications and regulations. In another setting where the clients' need is large-scale information dissemination, the consultant might necessarily remove herself from interpersonal contact with educators and deliver, instead, a factual report to a large audience. In instances where the consultant must adhere strictly to a small time window, she must limit her task accordingly. An example would be one-day performance audits that are sometimes conducted to ascertain cause for lack of improvement. In this case, the consultant has little time for extended dialogue with staff members and, of course, no return visits are possible.

When clients' multiple purposes, venues, and time allotments are juxtaposed alongside consultants' opportunities to teach analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation skills, the complex spectrum of consulting tasks

becomes evident. As we grasp the broad range of tasks that might be presented to a consultant, we understand why the concept of continual change aptly characterizes consultants' reality.

#### *Legislation Expands and Explains the Consultant's Role*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) that requires states to identify schools not making adequate yearly progress (see Appendix A) also requires them to provide technical support for such schools. In so doing, this legislation (most notably Section 1117) clarifies the type of outside help available to schools where students are at risk of not achieving academic growth. This support is to be intense and sustained. School support teams are to be established consisting of "persons knowledgeable about scientifically based research and practice on teaching and learning and about successful schoolwide projects, school reform, and improving educational opportunities for low-achieving students" (United States Department of Education, n.d. b). Such persons can be "representatives of outside consultant groups; or other individuals as the State educational agency, in consultation with the local educational agency, may determine appropriate" (Section 1117, A. 5. vi, vii). Supporting consultants are mandated by NCLB legislation to review a school's operation of its instructional program and to compile recommendations for improving student performance. They are to help the school with the "design, implementation, and monitoring of a plan that, if fully implemented, can reasonably be expected to improve student performance and help the school meet its goals for improvement, including adequate yearly progress" (Section



1117, B. i., ii.). Once implementation of improvement initiatives is underway, consultants are to determine whether additional assistance is needed “by the school or the school support team” (Section 1117, b. iv).

States also offer guidance to schools seeking persons qualified to help them through their improvement process. The Illinois State Board of Education, for example, cautions educators that providing technical assistance, “demands a high degree of skill and expertise. The providers of technical assistance should have experience in complex problem analysis; effective, scientifically based curriculum and instruction; and in working with teachers to create positive change” (n.d.). The Indiana State Department of Education describes technical assistance as “practical advice offered by an expert source that addresses specific areas for improvement” (n.d.). In Indiana, the local school district in which an identified school resides, “is not required to provide the technical assistance directly, although it may choose to do so. Other acceptable technical assistance providers include the SEA [state educational association]; an institution of higher education; a private, not-for-profit or for-profit organization; an educational service agency; or another entity with experience in helping schools improve academic achievement” (n.d.). Self-employed consultants’ businesses may qualify as a not-for-profit or for-profit organization.

### Impetus for This Research

Impetus for this research germinated during field experience. After completing twenty-one fulfilling and rewarding years as a teacher and principal, I

sought new professional challenges and moved from the Midwest to a northeastern state to begin work as an action plan coordinator for a district's central office. I was to consult for all schools within the district and help them collaboratively develop curricula and programs. While serving in various capacities within and beyond my district, I was sensitized to the challenges, exhilaration, and even emotional pain experienced by educational consultants throughout the state. I began to question why some school-consultant partnerships emanated success while many ended in mild to severe disappointment. As I listened to consultants tell their stories of victorious ventures as well as anguished retreats, I recognized that educators and consultants, fully intending to do good work for students, found it difficult to weave together improvement initiatives capable of standing the test of time. I came to believe that consultants whom I met might be representative of other consultants throughout the country, and gradually my need to better understand consultants' roles in the complex school change process led me to this study.

The need to understand school change is not only my need. In today's climate demanding equitable quality education for all American children, school change, incorporating inherent demands upon personnel and resources, is challenging educational leaders. This study is intended to address that challenge—specifically, to enhance the development of school capacity for improvement through school-consultant partnerships. This research report reflects my belief that educators and consultants need to better understand not

only successful partnering for local school improvement, but also the broader stage of organization change upon which actors play their individual roles.

As a means of illuminating the greater field of organization change within which school consulting occurs, this chapter first investigates organization change theory. It finds that although planning organization change as a series of logically sequenced stages helps school leaders design improvement initiatives, subunits within organizations (including schools) generally advance through change in a disjointed manner often throwing the organization into an uncomfortable, albeit temporary, state of disequilibrium. Although this study focused on the consultants' side of school-consultant partnerships, it seems wise to also illuminate school personnel, especially leaders whom consultants must guide through change processes. Examination of leaders' response to change pressures clarifies the task faced by consultants each time they approach new client schools. Therefore, this chapter also examines how leaders of changing systems, in this case schools, guide organization members while they first process and then practice change. As one chapter in a dissertation, this literature review is not intended to be an exhaustive study of organization theory, structure, and function. Instead, it presents aspects of scholarly research especially helpful toward understanding changing schools, those settings where my study's subjects, K-12 educational consultants, perform their work.

### **Organization Change Theory Contextualizes School Change**

Although Burke (2002) laments, "Organization change theory barely exists" (p. 121), theorists have been attempting to explain organization change for several decades (Argyris, 1970; Herrick, 1977; Lewin, 1947; Redmond, 2003). Theorists differ in their views of change as an organizational event. Some arrange organization change process within clearly defined stages, while others blur stage boundaries or name so many small steps within each stage as to create the illusion of a single continuum through multiple change experiences. Lewin (1947) as cited by Burke (2002) named three distinct change stages: (1) unfreezing, during which leaders convince organization members that change is needed and encourage them to relinquish current values and procedures. (2) moving, a period when members adopt new methods while implementing agreed upon actions, and (3) refreezing, when leaders attempt to solidify change so that it becomes permanent, a critical stage for schools according to Barnett and Carroll (1995) since "superintendents and principals may move on to other schools, [and] if a change initiative is overly dependent on a single leader, its momentum may then be lost" (p. 106). Division of change process into such distinct stages helps school leaders grasp the task that lies ahead. Clear division allows them to prioritize, sequence, and communicate progress to organization members.

Recognizing that such an approach may help novice change leaders make sense of change but may also be falsely reassuring, some theorists establish bridges among segments of change. Although Schein (1987) advises consultants that change stages "are conceptually distinct, and it is important for

the helper to be aware of what stage he is working in" (p. 93), he also refutes over-simplification of organization change theory, insisting that each stage, though considered separate from others, must be viewed as fraught with multifarious steps. Like Lewin (1947), he categorizes change in three stages, but he suggests seemingly dichotomous activities amid each stage. His first stage, similar to Lewin's unfreezing stage, requires simultaneous severance and friendly support—severance from the present even if guilt and anxiety must be introduced in order to launch the severance, and provision of a safety net to insure psychological safety for willing but anxious changers.

His second stage, comparable to Lewin's (1947) idea of moving, has organization members turning both inward toward local leadership and outward toward external experts for guidance and affirmation. Schein's (1987) third stage, similar to Lewin's refreezing concept, denotes change solidification through multiple levels of trustful interaction. Trust in the particular change that has recently been implemented must occur within individuals so they can internalize new beliefs, but internalized trust must also emanate outwardly to co-workers. To this convoluted mix, Schein adds a tempest of interpersonal relations activated as organization members perform changed behaviors while simultaneously observing colleagues' interpretation of appropriate new behaviors. Because actions of one may require reciprocal actions from another, members must learn to rapidly mesh both observation of others' behavior and their own performance of unfamiliar behaviors.

Other theorists reject the notion that change stages can be clearly delineated and propose instead that all stages overlap and are even interwoven. Organizational change “is not a neat, sequential process” (Beckhard and Harris, 1987, p. 30). No stage is finished before another begins and no stage should be assumed to be complete, never to be revisited. Burke (2002) links separation and overlap theories, agreeing that theories around distinct stages “are helpful for planning and managing a change effort” (p. 155), but cautioning that,

Taking this way of thinking too literally, however, will often result in errors of judgment and being blindsided by unanticipated outcomes. We must bear in mind, therefore, that as organization change actually occurs, it is not sequential and is far more complex, ambiguous, and even ‘messier’ than the models convey. (p. 155)

Some theorists attempt to soften boundaries between stages by identifying more of them and thereby making them seem more transitional. As cited by Burke (1994), Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958), identify five rather than three phases of organizational change: “(1) development of a need for change, (2) establishment of a change relationship, (3) working toward change, (4) generalization and stabilization of change, and (5) achieving a terminal relationship [with the consultant]” (p. 59). Burke notes that Lippitt et al., especially, demonstrate transitional rather than separatist thinking, since they deliberately use the term *phase* rather than Lewin’s (1947) *stage*, implying that in reality change segments do overlap.

Recognition of complexities within each change stage allows the overall experience to mimic a long series of small steps rather than a few clearly separated major stages. While Herrick (1977) finds advantage in structuring models with discrete divisions that “allow for explanatory concepts to be developed from various aspects of the process of activity” (p.16), he hesitates to “contradict the idea of process or continuums” (p. 16) and cautions that each stage entails numerable variables. “Various intervening mechanisms [which induce] increments of change” (p. 16) during each stage gradually move the organization from an unsatisfactory to a satisfying state.

Organization change theories need not span entire systems. Bridges (1980) identifies three change stages (p. 9) as do Lewin (1947) and Schein (1987), but he internalizes those stages within members who individually receive and disseminate forces of change. While an organization is undergoing change, every involved individual is also experiencing change. During the first phase called *endings*, people begin to relinquish former ideas and functions. In the second phase, *neutral zone*, they experience anxiety; and during the final phase, *new beginnings*, they begin to identify with new visions and expected behaviors.

In summary, theorists recognize that change occurs in distinguishable segments, yet caution that practitioners should not expect to close the door on one segment and step unencumbered into the next. Subunits of the organization may progress through change segments at varying speeds, and even greater variance may be experienced by individuals within those subunits. Additionally,

subunits or even the entire organization may find it necessary to revisit a segment once thought to have been conquered.

Continuing with its literature review, this chapter now examines how leaders respond to calls for change. Understanding leadership behavior during periods of change is essential to understanding the nature of school-consultant partnerships.

### Leaders Help Schools Interact With Their Community Environment

Birkner and Birkner (1999) suggest that leadership capacity rests in leaders' ability to view their organizations through biologists' lens as living, growing organisms with "limiting factors that could slow or delay change" (p. 32). They contend that leadership leverage is not about "pushing harder or changing faster" (p. 32), but about expanding the leader's ability to contemplate his organization's living nature, that is, its subsystems interactively forming one living system. This biologist's lens captures an organization's ability to sense environmental pressure and to respond defensively or proactively, thoughtfully or reflexively. In the next section, we will see that leaders who know their organizations to be action-oriented systems capable of disseminating either help or harm are infused with a sense of responsibility exercisable through moral imagination (Johnson, 1993; Vildaver-Cohen, 1998; Werhane, 1998).

#### *Leadership: Its Moral Foundation*

Moral imagination grants leaders ability to comprehend situational context, consider alternate actions, and "envision the potential help and harm that are



likely to result from a given action" (Johnson, 1993, p. 202). It conceptually acknowledges a living, open system's opportunity to apply energy in helpful or harmful ways and to intimately affect the environment with which it shares permeable borders. Moral imagination does not embody specific answers for every situation and does not tell leaders what to do. Instead, as a "theoretical construct" (Werhane, 1998, P. 15), it frames moral decision making for turbulent periods, advising that leaders (1) discern contextual factors that affect perception, (2) reframe the problem from different perspectives, and (3) develop morally just problem-solving methods (Vidaver-Cohen, 1998) "Care, concern, and good intentions are not enough" (Johnson, 1993, p. 202) and should not be assumed to encapsulate adequate bases for responsible decisions. However, by exercising moral imagination, leaders can enhance their decision making with dispassionate consideration of perspectives salient to all stakeholders, whether those perspectives are voiced or silenced. Leaders can discern situational nuances and anticipate the effect decisions might have upon organization personnel and others in the environment beyond shared borders.

While the phrase *moral imagination* implies prefacing decisions with contemplation of consequence, Fullan's (2001a) closely related term *moral purpose* suggests "acting with the intent of making a positive difference" (p. 3). Fullan contends that education leaders exercising moral purpose value not only the finished product, that is, the educated student, but also school staff; therefore, decisions consider long-term teacher needs as well as immediate needs of current students. Fullan concludes that leaders "simply cannot be

effective without behaving in a morally purposeful way” (p. 15). Moral imagination and moral purpose share an attention to diversity. Although diverse interests and goals can be problematic, the very essence of moral purpose is “to forge interaction—and even mutual purpose—across groups” (p. 25).

Whether imagining diverse perspectives or envisioning shared goals, moral leaders honor diverse followers. Sergiovanni (2000) says that school leaders can make this happen if they develop their schools into covenantal communities. “In covenantal communities the purpose of leadership is to create a shared followership. Leaders in covenantal communities function as head followers” (p. 167). He believes that followers are more likely to follow those who share their beliefs than those who are personally likable. Viewed in this light, the strong school leader is one who learns with his staff, develops new ideas with his staff, and activates best practices with his staff. Thus, concepts of moral imagination, moral purpose, and moral leadership seem to lead directly to a label coined by educators, instructional leader. In later chapters we will hear consultants strongly urge superintendents and principals to function as instructional leaders.

#### *Leadership: Its Position and Behavior*

Leadership does not exist in a vacuum, but in ability to inspire, recruit, and mobilize followers (Nutt and Backoff, 1996). Unlike managers who concentrate upon policy and operations, leaders necessarily sustain intent focus upon human relationships. They strive to understand how organization members conceptualize change and how they might be encouraged to adopt innovation.

However, leaders are foremost individuals, and although their leadership thrives amidst followers, it begins with their self-awareness (Schein, 2004). As a precursor to understanding subordinates' behavior during organization change, leaders recall their own first response to turbulent environmental factors signaling need for change. They anticipate how their own emotions and behaviors precipitated by pending change might be duplicated, modified, and even intensified in organization members. Leaders analyze the process by which they first neutralized their own concerns about anticipated change and apply such self-understanding to plans for retraining staff. They willingly draw attention to themselves while paying attention to others (Nutt and Backoff, 1996). Harrison (1995) describes this as "being drawn to a vision of the highest good for myself and others—interdependent, mutual" (p. 3).

This brief examination of organization theory and moral leadership applied to schools illustrates the dynamic setting in which external educational consultants work. It serves to characterize consultants' client schools as complex, living systems. Even before we hear from consultants who participated in this study, we can appreciate the skill and knowledge they necessarily bring to their task. In the next chapter, I explain the methods I used to give voice to five such people, my study subjects who are known to be commendable consultants.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

From my earliest contemplation of this research, I knew that I wanted to give voice to consultants who were actively engaged in school consulting. I wanted to hear them tell their stories. I understood that I had to choose a research method that would permit some degree of interaction between the participants and me so that I could listen and ask questions and listen again. Prior to describing this interactive method, this chapter explains why this research is needed and describes my five areas of research focus. It identifies questions that guided my research, clarifies my role as the researcher, and explains how I gathered and analyzed data. Finally, I briefly introduce the content of each chapter in this report.

### The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate K-12 school consultants' perceptions of schooling and consulting methods best suited to supporting school reform. I sought to illuminate commendable consulting practice and to heighten educators' awareness of consulting as a valuable school improvement resource.

Although some contracts between K-12 schools and itinerant consultants extend beyond one year, school-consultant relationships are essentially temporary and fragmented; therefore, change becomes a fundamental feature of such partnerships. Consultants come and go from buildings frequently, typically remaining only one or two days at a time while meeting with varying individuals to

address evolving issues. Each month brings visits to different schools, and as contractual periods begin and expire, a consultant forges new and concludes old client relationships. This study centered upon the commendable consultant as a consistent, pivotal actor amidst continuously emerging client change; therefore, my sample population included only external, itinerant K-12 consultants and excluded those permanently affixed to school districts.

This study did not address any particular school reform model provider for which a consultant might work. In other words, it examined the messenger, not the message. I investigated exemplary consultants—those whose reputations positioned them as models of professional expertise and efficacy—whose skill was attested to by supervisory educators with first hand knowledge of their work.

Through recent decades and continuing today, desire for school improvement has patterned educational discourse. Although school districts still function somewhat autonomously, they are today jointly engaged in a national effort to create equitable educational opportunity for all American children. Federal legislative mandates, along with tensions inherent in standards alignment, prompt some administrators to seek external expert guidance as they steer their schools into this challenging movement. In recent years Title I in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provided schools access to educational consultants through the Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSR). Although this program is being phased out (M. McNeely, personal communication, August 8, 2006), NCLB's school evaluation framework called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) continues today (See Appendix A). Through

CSR and AYP guidelines and funding, schools have been encouraged to seek outside consultants to assist their needs assessment and improvement initiatives. (United States Department of Education, n.d.,a)

Unlike CSR consultants who were invited to schools where reform initiatives were voluntary and, in fact, required arduous application procedures, AYP consultants are more likely to be called to schools under duress. NCLB requires that schools accepting Title I funds evaluate students' academic achievement to determine whether they have made adequate yearly progress, and schools failing to make AYP must take corrective steps which may include hiring an outside consultant (United States Department of Education, n.d., b).

Given that client schools have mixed motivations for seeking outside help, consultants may find themselves working among diverse educators ranging from eager reformers to deeply entrenched resisters, but regardless of the catalyst for their partnership, consultants and school staff share responsibility for the outcome of their union. Although much has been written about school improvement needs that draw schools and consultants together, less study has been given to their partnerships. My research addressed this knowledge gap by examining consultants' perceptions of their school-consultant relationships. In particular, it investigated consultants' (a) self-awareness, (b) beliefs about school-consultant partnerships, (c) identification of schooling factors that impact their efficacy, (d) choices they make among numerous consulting roles and (e) practices they employ to fulfill chosen roles. In sum, these five areas of

investigation attended to my question: what does a commendable school reform consultant know and do that effectively facilitates school improvement?

### Foci of Research

In the following sections of this chapter, five research foci are introduced:

(1) the essence of commendable consultants, (2) consultants' beliefs about school-consultant partnerships, (3) factors that impact consultant efficacy, (4) partnership roles that consultants play, and (5) methods that commendable consultants employ. In later chapters, each one is explored in depth as participants are given voice to describe their consulting reality.

#### *Research Focus One: Understanding the Essence of Commendable Consultants*

Because consultants repeatedly travel to different towns and schools meeting with new administrators and teachers, it can be said that this career engages only two constants—one being change and the other being the consultants themselves, that is to say consultants' nature or essence. My desire to understand the essence of a successful consultant led me to investigate how commendable consultants make sense of change or how they identify their personal attributes as change agents and align those attributes with client needs. I wanted to ascertain whether they discerned in themselves characteristics which uniquely qualified them to produce change in people and organizations. I also wanted to know whether my study subjects, considered by others to be at the top of their game, felt the need to refine or sharpen those characteristics and whether they strove to maintain consistency of manner and purpose regardless

of their client situations, or whether they valued flexibility as indicative of professional skill and, therefore, purposefully adjusted to client behaviors. It seemed prudent to begin my study with an examination of the internal essence of commendable consultants, that which emerges as catalyst for change.

*Research Focus Two: Understanding Commendable Consultants' Beliefs about School-Consultant Partnerships*

As was true of my study participants, school consultants typically experience K-12 schooling first as students and then as teachers and/or administrators. During their lengthy exposure to school life, they acquire perceptions about teaching and learning as they encounter numerous teachers, administrators, pedagogical practices, and building environments, all of which influence their beliefs about school personnel and schools as organizational learning sites. Research tells us that teaching draws from both professional and personal experiences and that teachers reflect on those past experiences as they cope with present challenges and contemplate future hopes and expectations (Bulloch, Knowles, & Crow, 1992; Clandinin, Connelly, & Craig, 1995; van Manen, 1991; Vinz, 1996). Similarly, multiple influences formed and refined during the teaching and administering years ultimately influence consultants' beliefs about client schools.

Literature suggests that consultants' helping capacity is strengthened as they first understand their personal beliefs and then anticipate client behaviors that might trigger instinctive, belief-based responses. Thus, they fulfill their responsibility for productive partnerships partially through anticipatory



preparation (Nevis, 1987; Rogers, 1961; Schein, 1999). Schein says that in the midst of observations and dialogues with clients, a consultant will make error upon error if he is not continuously tuned in to his own self, and he urges consultants to “learn to distinguish inside yourself observations, reactions, judgments, and impulses to act (intervene)” (p. 93). Rogers finds benefit in consultants not only understanding how they respond to varying client behaviors, but also in not necessarily masking those reactions. Transparent reactions can effectively build client trust and need not be feared by consultants. “I have come to recognize that being trustworthy does not demand that I be rigidly consistent but that I can be dependably real....It is safe to be transparently real” (p. 57).

As consultants become more attuned to their beliefs, they recognize that consulting sometimes requires them to modify or even discard instinctive behaviors. In other words, change brings gain of the new and loss of the old. A 2005 pilot study found, for example, that a teacher or administrator’s belief in himself as a leader may propel him toward a consulting career; yet, as a consultant he may need to curb certain innate leader behaviors (Satchell, 2005). Even as consultants experience momentary loss when they subsume belief in their own leadership ability within client collaboration, they also urge clients to make school improvement decisions entailing both gain and loss (Nevis, 1987; Sparks, 1998). This gain-loss factor affects consultants and clients differently as each participant experiences individualized regret for what is lost at the moment that a decision is made. “I consider the difficulty of bearing the awareness of regret to be one of the great barriers to organizational change, as well as to

individual change” (Nevis, p. 198). Awareness that change forces choice and that something is always relinquished when a choice is made enhances consultants’ understanding that although school-consultant partnering is meant to be a shared experience, each choice forces an individual reality upon all participants.

Through literature study of how a consultant’s beliefs might impact his practice, I was guided to incorporate investigation of commendable consultants’ beliefs into my research plan. I did not, however, anticipate that my subjects’ belief systems would encompass sharp distinctions between themselves and school personnel. Upon discovering their tendency to distance themselves from their client schools, I probed further to learn how consultants maintained their sense of professional independence.

*Research Focus Three: Understanding Commendable Consultants’ Perceptions of Factors That Impact Efficacy*

When consultants enter into school partnerships, they do not necessarily enjoy barrier free access to clients ready to spring into improvement initiatives. Three factors that impact consultants’ ability to generate lasting school change were identified in a pilot study: (a) administrative leadership, (b) teacher belief systems, and (c) teacher communities (Satchell, 2005). Educational literature also describes the effect these factors have upon school improvement (Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2001b; Murphy, 2002; Nevis, 1987; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2001).

*Administrator leadership.*

Some education scholars call for administrators who are capable of more than organization management, who also understand and can facilitate teaching and learning. Murphy (2002) describes a recent transition in administrators' roles from organizational to educational leader.

School administration atrophied over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the field gravitated toward conceptions of leadership based on scientific images of business management and social science research....The key to reculturing was changing the taproot of the profession from management to education. (p.187)

Such a shift in professional grounding was exemplified when 32 educational agencies and 13 education administrative associations formed the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to develop standards with new focus upon school administration practice. The Consortium's "vision of leadership is based on the premise that the criteria and standards for the professional practice of school leaders is best grounded in the knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning" (Council of Chief State School Officers, n.d., p. 1). Standards 1-3 describe the versatile school administrator who facilitates "a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community," who "nurtures an instructional program conducive to student learning," while also ensuring "management of the organization" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 10).

Observers of school administrators, including itinerant consultants and researchers, understand that such standards do not assure that all principals will

practice strong organization and instructional leadership. "Boeckmann [1999]...found that although the ISLLC standards were highly regarded by administrators, they incorporate them into their day-to-day activities at much lower levels" (Boeckmann and Dickinson, 2001). Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) explain that neither standards nor organizational policies guarantee quality leadership and that administrators' individual qualities merged with local conditions tell the real story.

To gain insight on leadership practice, we need to understand a task *as it unfolds* from the perspective and through the "theories in use" of the practitioner. And we need to understand the knowledge, expertise, and skills that the leaders bring to the execution of the task. (p. 25)

Spillane et al. also note that leadership practice is not ensconced solely within principals' personalities or training. Daily practice is influenced by "artifacts, tools, and structures of various sort" (p.26). "Espoused practices, while often readily accessible, serve as insufficient guides to leadership practice, suggesting that an investigation of leadership practice must involve both observing practice as it unfolds and asking practitioners about the observed practice" (p.24). Spillane's point reminds us that administrators' willingness or hesitancy to invite consultants' critique of their work behavior ultimately impacts their schools' capacity for improvement. My research studied consultants' perceptions of administrators as contributors or hindrances to school-consultant partnerships.

*Teacher and administrator belief systems.*

Literature suggests that when consultants contract with client schools, they approach unfamiliar school cultures upon which they will soon depend. "Without these supportive cultures, reforms will falter, staff morale and commitment will wither, and student learning will slip" (Peterson and Deal, 1998, p. 28). Since school cultures are framed by staff belief systems and "changes in beliefs and understanding are the foundation of achieving lasting reform" (Fullan, 2001 b, p. 45), those beliefs notably impact consultants' opportunity to guide schools toward change. Although Fullan concludes that changes "in what people do and think are essential if the intended outcome is to be achieved" (p.46), he also cautions that belief system adjustments "challenge the core values held by individuals regarding the purposes of education; moreover, beliefs are often not explicit, discussed, or understood, but rather are buried at the level of unstated assumptions" (p.44). By helping teachers and administrators understand that proposed changes quite naturally challenge but need not repress beliefs, consultants encourage them to consider change initiatives.

*Teacher and administrator trust.*

As teachers and administrators interact with each other, they add depth to their belief systems, choosing where among colleagues they will place their trust. In reporting on a decade-long study of 400 Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2003) wrote, "Relational trust is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community" (p. 42). Peterson and Deal (1998) emphasize that opportunities for improvement abound when trust develops into sharing. "Strong positive cultures

are places with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn” (p. 29). As I focused on my subjects’ perceptions of teacher and administrator beliefs, I studied how commendable consultants first gain and then nurture trust so that it permeates all facets of their school-consultant partnerships.

*Teacher and administrator resistance.*

Teacher and administrator beliefs may also be manifested through resistance toward either the consultant or his message (Bostic and Rauch, 1999; Fullan, 2001a; Nevis, 1987). In the field of education, resistance to change is a complex concept since its root causes vary from apathy, to fear, to gaps in knowledge. Avery, Beach, and Coler (2003) note “a basic tension between *will*—the desire or motivation to make curriculum changes, and *capacity*—the feasibility to make such changes given time, energy, expertise, and resources” (p. 28).

Although resistance may at first appear to hinder school improvement, Fullan (2001 b) suggests that in a convoluted way resisters might actually contribute to proposed school improvement initiatives by exposing weaknesses to which enthusiasts are blinded. There may be something about resisters’ particular classroom realities that affords them a unique perspective; therefore, they may offer a superior version of the original proposal. Even if a consultant can discern no positive input in a resister’s words, she will at the very least be offered a glimpse into looming implementation breakdowns. As resisters voice their doubts, they reveal how they are likely to thwart implementation and the

type of training and support that will best ameliorate their concerns. Fullan concludes, therefore, that resisters' insight can be valuable. According to Heifetz (1994), a counterintuitive rule of thumb is required in order to reject "one's emotional impulse...to squash those in the community who raise disturbing questions. Consequently, an authority should protect those whom he [or she] wants to silence. Annoyance is often a signal of opportunity" (p. 99).

Nevis (1987) also appreciates client resistance. He explains that "there is great value in the client [organization] having strong forces against change" (p. 60), because the consultant's duty is to heighten his client's awareness of inside impediments to change, both the change being attempted with the consultant's help and future changes which organization personnel may attempt to effect on their own. By acting out resistance in the consultant's presence, the resister allows the consultant to convert the behavior into a teaching moment and model a respectful response to resisters' protective instincts on behalf of their school. My study explored consultants' perceptions of teacher resistance along with their response methodology.

### *Professional learning communities*

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are teacher teams that collaboratively analyze student data, draw conclusions, clarify intended outcomes, and share strategies (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). Literature indicates that the probability of teachers adjusting their beliefs during collaborative endeavors is increased when they share meaningful tasks such as those generated in a PLC setting. "Significant educational change consists of

changes in beliefs, teaching style, and materials, which can come about only through a process of personal development in a social context...The key term is professional learning community" (Fullan, 2001 b, p. 124). PLCs afford teachers arenas for considering others' beliefs and building trust while engaging in shared work. It is important to note, however, that teachers' inclination to consider consultants' suggestions is influenced not only by the presence of professional learning communities, but by the communities' ability to do real collaborative work with the consultant. "Teachers who have had the benefit of working within a community of teachers to evaluate and plan together attest to the value and power of such collaborations" (Rigsby and DeMulder, 2003, p. 24).

The outcomes of such community efforts are strategies teachers believe in and are committed to because they have developed the strategies. Even if the strategies are new to them, they understand where the strategies come from and how they were developed. (p. 22)

This research examined how consultants make sense of professional learning communities and how they feel the presence or absence of client school PLCs affects teachers' views of consultants as colleagues and their willingness to walk with consultants into improvement initiatives.

#### *Research Focus Four: Understanding Commendable Consultants' Choices of Consulting Roles*

While many K-12 school consultants formerly played familiar insiders' roles as students and educators, they now locate themselves as outsiders contractually invited to enter client schools and infuse them with resourceful



expertise. Literature indicates they position their outsiders' roles along a scale ranging from detached observer to aggressive transformer and that they make correlative methodological choices (Piele, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1987; Schein, 1999). My research explored consultants' role choices and their perceptions of the roles they play when they enter into partnerships with schools.

Contractual agreements can severely restrict or broadly expand consultants' interaction with teachers. In some cases, the consultant's contact with personnel is limited to small groups such as teacher-led, site-based leadership teams. Since she is asked to analyze need and recommend solutions while dialoging with those representatives only, she may never see any other staff members. Furthermore, in some schools contracts clarifying consultants' performance expectations may be negotiated with only one or a few administrators who serve, in effect, as gatekeepers to the school, describing their school's need and making all arrangements for consultant services. When the consultant moves around the building reiterating the administrators' analyses, she may be seen as the administration spokesperson and may experience limited receptivity from teachers.

Although contracts may coral or expand their interactions with staff, consultants' perception of the roles they might effectively play with school partners is not determined solely by contractual language. Their personal interpretation of productive consultant-client relationships also influences role-playing choices they make, and they choose among many possible roles, ranging from the linking agent who need know little about his clients (Piele, 1975) to the

process agent who teaches clients how to manage change (Schein, 1999), to the change agent who must know his client teachers very well (Erchul and Martens (1997).

Piele (1975) describes a consultant as an impersonal link between his client and resources. A “linking agent” does not have to know his clients before he can be useful to them. He simply extracts information from both his client and his resource providers.

A close interpersonal working relationship with the client is not particularly important so long as the agent can acquire necessary relevant information. Such an agent need not spend much time with any client....This agent role rests on the assumption that it is the client system's job to do most of the work in changing the schools. (p. 25)

Typically, such linking agents “operate at the interface between new ideas and products and current educational practice” (p. 3), merely identifying client need, locating resources, and linking clients with tools and materials.

Other literature suggests that when process rather than output is the agreed upon focus of the client-consultant relationship, it is not necessary that the consultant have prior experience or knowledge of the client's field of work (Nevis, 1987; Schein, 1999). When client personnel seek to better understand the processes they normally use as they work together, they may call upon a consultant to teach them how to function more productively but not to analyze local needs or find solutions—tasks they reserve for themselves. By observing school personnel at work and coding their behavior carefully, a consultant can

analyze factors that are impacting productivity and guide them toward greater functional capacity. Process consultants see “the major objective of consulting relationships as being the education of the client system in how to improve its awareness of its functioning and to enhance its ability to take actions that improve this functioning” (Nevis, 1987, p. xi).

Contrasting sharply with the idea that consultants might simply link teachers with resources or teach them process, Rosenfeld (1987) binds teachers and consultants together as partners equally knowledgeable about teaching and learning. Consultants must possess understanding “in both collaborative consultation practice and knowledge of quality instruction” (p. 18). Erchul and Martens (1997) concur. “We believe that school consultants must have an understanding of schools as organizations and teachers as professionals within that organization before attempting to offer consultation services” (p. 102).

Regardless of the agreement under which an education consultant operates or the particular method he or she employs, literature suggests that roles played by school reform consultants are variations of one overarching function—that of educator.

We view consulting as a way of practicing a profession. That is, it is not truly a profession in and of itself. A surgeon does not become something other than a surgeon when he or she acts as a consultant to others. Nor does a lawyer, an engineer, a marketer, or any other professional...change his or her profession when acting as a consultant. (Holts & Zahn, 2004, p.4)

During the course of data collection, I noted that my subjects frequently mentioned their pre-consulting career experiences in classrooms and administrative offices. As Holts and Zahn suggest, my participants seemed to view consulting not as a new career, but as a new focus in their lifetime service as educators. Thus prompted, I explored roles they chose to play and, within those roles, methods which they found to be most effective to their function as consulting educators.

#### *Research Focus Five: Understanding Commendable Consultants' Method Choices*

No facet of their practice offers consultants greater freedom than method choice. They cannot control factors in client schools that impact their opportunity to be effective, and they may feel constrained in their choice of roles. But in most cases, consultants are free to employ their preferred methods.

As my study participants described their methods, they seemed more comfortable describing how they work rather than what they do. For example, they spoke about working diplomatically with resisters without telling exactly what they do. They talked about showing clients what they need to understand without telling just what they would show. They said they take the measure of improvement teams and match methods to a team's capacity, but they did not tell specifically how methods would vary from one team to the next. When I asked probing questions about exactly what methods they used, the respondents tended to slide toward identifying client needs. As readers will note later when reading the methods chapter, my respondents did sometimes attempt to describe

their methodology. It was not a topic they deliberately avoided. It just seemed more natural to them to heavily infuse talk about methods with analysis of clients. They appeared to think of themselves as evaluators of human behavior far more than technicians bringing the right tools to the task.

### Guiding Questions

The five research focus areas just described: essence, beliefs, factors, roles and methods were framed by two guiding research questions designed to clarify this study's parameters while allowing subjects freedom to explore multiple facets of their partnerships with client schools. I sought to open conversational doors for my subjects and invite them to highlight and illuminate features of consulting deemed by them to be integral to their specialized relationships with school personnel.

The two research questions were:

1. What are commendable consultants' beliefs about
  - a. themselves as agents of change?
  - b. features of school-consultant partnerships?
  - c. factors that impact consultant efficacy?
2. What roles and methods do commendable consultants adopt to effect lasting school change?

### Phenomenological Framework

In stating that the “phenomenological interest of doing research materializes itself in our everyday practical concerns,” van Manen (1990, p. 12) encapsulates my research intent. My ultimate purpose for asking commendable consultants to reveal their perceptions of schooling and suitable consulting practice was deeply grounded in just such everyday practical concerns. This pragmatic approach seemed essential to my hope that readers would contextualize my participants’ workday realities in readers’ own school settings and then consider how school-consultant partnerships might enhance local school improvement. When phenomenological research’s pursuance of wisdom within lived experience (van Manen, 1990) is employed by researchers in the education arena, it allows researcher, participant, and reader to conjointly seek wisdom in a context familiar to all—that is, schools and schooling. It follows naturally that readers of my findings may find commonalities between the lived experience of study participants and their own local school lived experience and may aptly apply research engendered wisdom to local school improvement needs. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them. Phenomenologists agree that a rich, full understanding of any human phenomenon requires a deep, probing examination of people’s lived experiences (Gadamer, 1990; Heidegger, 1962, 1972; Husserl, 1931, 1970, 1973; Moustakas, 1994, Van Manen, 1990). Since the purpose of this study was to gain a richer, fuller understanding of the phenomenon school consulting, phenomenological inquiry seemed most appropriate.

Phenomenology's inherent ability to examine real lived experience supports my goal of encouraging educators and consultant practitioners to contemplate anew ways that school-consultant partnerships might energize and sustain school reform. Because phenomenological research "wants to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it was experienced" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29), this framework was well suited to giving voice to consultants, thus, allowing them opportunity to illuminate school improvement from their side of the school-consultant partnership. My desire was to study the consultants' perspective and life world and to present their perspective in a manner that would resonate with educators whose life worlds also include schooling. Because I had, prior to beginning this research, conversed with many disillusioned consultants and perhaps because I am interested in a consulting career, I realized that I was particularly sympathetic to consultants. I sought to represent them to my readers rather than critically evaluate them or to explore the consultancy role from multiple perspectives. "The quality of any phenomenological study can be judged in its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher's discoveries allowing the reader to see the worlds of others in new and deeper ways" (Finlay, 2005, p. 3). Finlay explains further, "The key is to try to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the lived world being described" (p. 3). This I have attempted to do.

In addition to seeking wisdom through examination of everyday practical concerns, phenomenology also establishes a tight link between the researcher and her object of study. Van Manen (1990) says, "The researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness" (p. 33). Although the

researcher has not lived her subject's life experience, phenomenology's interactive methodology does allow her to share in the telling of that experience. In other words, neither the subject nor the researcher singly controls the data gathering process. While the researcher's open-ended questions permit her subject to discretionarily draw from his experience, the researcher may also probe deeply into that experience through additional questioning.

The ensuing ebb and flow of questions, responses, and further questions between researcher and subject poses a need for research caution. In order to avoid an eventual accumulation of unwieldy, disconnected data, the phenomenological researcher must build her study upon clearly defined data-gathering components. Although I could not fully anticipate how my subjects' responses would spawn additional probing questions, through my study's design, I did establish investigative procedures intended to confine data gathering within predetermined parameters.

### Study Design

Employing a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, I examined consultants' perceptions of K-12 school-consultant partnering through narrative interviews (Casey, 1995-1996) of five consultants. Each subject was interviewed individually four times (See Appendix B). With three consultants I conducted the first interview in person either in their offices or at hotels, thereafter, in most cases the remaining three interviews were conducted by telephone. With the other two consultants, all four interviews were done by



telephone. One participant preferred telephone interviews, and the other considered face-to-face interviews impractical given the great geographic distance between us. As a means of observing consultants while they engaged in consulting work, I also shadowed two participants in various settings, ranging from intimate planning sessions with colleagues to larger venues involving parents and school staffs, to region-wide leadership workshops. Shadowing contextualized participants' voices and provided opportunity to "collect a depth of information about a particular behavior" (Brown, n.d). In addition, I offered to provide four consultants with hand-held recorders and invited them to record their thoughts about their work. Two accepted my offer, but only one actually returned data-filled tapes. With each consultant, the data-gathering period lasted approximately three months. In total, this research invited consultants' stories through 20 interviews, 11 shadowings, and numerous follow-up phone calls and emails.

### *My Role as Researcher*

*With the launching of this study, I approached the final stage of a search that brought me to Michigan State University. Although I am a Midwesterner, I had spent the previous two years in a mountainous eastern region where I worked out of a district central office but frequently crisscrossed the state observing and talking with educators. During my travels I had numerous puzzling conversations with consultants, some who traversed the state as I did and others who worked in one district only. K-12 consultants represent a minority among*

educators. They are not tightly networked. During the two years that I traveled this state, I found them at events, but those events were always others' events – workshops planned for central office staff, administrators, or teachers. I never attended an event that was planned for and attended exclusively by educational consultants. Our conversations, which sometimes occurred at very public lunch tables or sometimes at more private tables of their choosing, were inspiring, alarming, and confusing. I was inspired by their vision of reaching multiple students through teaching and supporting teachers. I was alarmed by their frequent tales of defeat, and I was confused by their apparent inability to align school staffs behind improvement initiative.

*Although I enjoyed listening to some enthusiastic and hopeful consultants, I soon became aware of a consistent thread of frustration running through many of our conversations.*

*✦ My work with that school was off to a great start, but the principal moved on and the program has gone flat.*

*✦ The Board seemed excited to contract with me, but the teachers are giving me the cold shoulder.*

*✦ I've formed a leadership team that is eager for reform, but I don't know if it will ever go school-wide (personal communication, 2001-2003).*

*Consultants told of leaving schools in tears, of being figuratively "beat up" by teachers, and in the face of withering administrative support, wondering why they had ever been hired. Three times they looked over their shoulder, lowered their voices, and blurted to me that they had to find other work.*

Before long, experiences in my own district began to illuminate their frustration. I watched teachers arrive for a peer-led professional development workshop wearing white T-shirts painted with black stripes and the word *school* in their insignia replaced with *jail*. I observed teachers march into a principal-led meeting wearing boxes over their heads indicating they wouldn't participate. I attended a district-wide principal planning session in which plans for inter-school collaboration were enthusiastically adopted and was stunned later when a few vocal teachers announced that their school wouldn't participate while the principal sat silently, helplessly in the corner. When I hired a well-known content specialist to hold a series of workshops in my district and asked him to require that teachers try one idea between each workshop and report back to him in writing, he seemed amazed. In fact, after thinking about it for a few weeks, he told me that the concept of expecting accountability between professional development sessions was so novel to him that he planned to present it to leaders in a neighboring state.

As the months passed by and I continued to travel in and out of my district reaching every corner of the state, it seemed to me that this state's grassroots building level education system mirrored its geography. Travel in this region is literally a mountain and valley experience. You climb to the top and look out over a vast panorama of summer green or fall orange or winter white, and then drop back into a valley where you often drive some distance without being able to see beyond the next curve in the road. It seemed that too many educators, teachers and administrators alike, were dwelling in the valleys, unable to see new vistas,

unwilling or not daring to welcome new ideas. Consultants I met pondered their future, wondering whether they should try harder, settle for intermittent success, or find other work.

Finally, I concluded that I needed to climb out of those valleys and go to a place where I could gain a fresh perspective on school consulting. I came to Michigan State University, and eventually to this dissertation research, to find out what skilled consultants knew about their profession. In that sense, my role as project researcher seemed highly personal. I eagerly awaited interviews with my study's exemplary consultants; yet, as I began the interviews, I strove to remain mindful of Kaufman's (1994) caution that phenomenology interviewers must take care not to unduly influence subjects through facial gestures or impulsive verbal responses. Although this work was driven by my internalized need to know, I attempted to separate myself sufficiently to allow accurate data to flow from my subjects unimpeded.

I discovered that shadowing my study's subjects situated me in both stable and precarious researcher positions. On the day that I sat along the wall of a conference room to watch a consultant inform a recently formed diagnostic team, or when I joined a large audience to hear a consultant address grant compliance issues, or while I sat quietly in the corner of a pretty bed and breakfast sitting room to observe a consultant while she molded a diverse group into a collaborative team—on those days shadowing seemed relatively easy. I had merely to remain alert, listen attentively, and record accurately. However, on

the days when I shadowed consultants inside school buildings, maintaining a detached observational stance was much more challenging.

When I walk through the doors of a school building, I feel that I'm home. My immediate response is to find out what is happening and join in—an instinct that, of course, had to be squelched if I was to shadow my subject rigorously and objectively. While strolling in and out of classrooms with a consultant, I sometimes found myself across the room studying a bulletin board or initiating a conversation with a student only to realize that I had wandered too far to eavesdrop on interaction between the consultant and her student of interest. When I joined a subject while she interviewed students and teachers, I occasionally realized I was leaning forward, momentarily drawn into their worlds and about to insert my own question because there was something I so wanted to know about them. I had to remind myself sharply that I was there to watch the consultant and learn how she framed the interview and responded to the participants. One day when I accompanied a subject and her colleagues to lunch, I suddenly realized that I had joined the conversation and immediately told myself to eat more, talk less, and fill that notepad balanced precariously on my lap! While walking from one gathering place in a school building to another, as the group around my subject jostled itself into different configurations, I would sometimes find myself walking beside someone new. It seemed that my researcher self went into high alert and suddenly I would be quizzing my walking companion instead of my subject. Shadowing proved to be a rich, multi-textured experience in which I was frequently submersed in a place where I reacted

comfortably and instinctively, but needed, instead, to remain alertly focused on one person, subsume my own response to place, and sense school through her eyes and ears.

### Data Collection

Within the framework of phenomenology, I collected data through narrative research methodology which invites participants to tell their personal stories. Unlike quantitative research in which “distance and control are highly valued” (Corbin and Morse, 2003, p. 338), narration bestows freedom to story tellers, and when narrative research employs interviews, both the investigator and subject enter into a temporary but intimate setting in which “one can never be sure what will occur” (Roulston, deMarrais, and Lewis, 2003, p. 643).

Casey (1995-1996) positions narrative research in a pendulum swing away from early 20<sup>th</sup> Century positivist scientific inquiry, toward the 1980s acceptance of qualitative study. Today narrative research locates self-revelation among legitimate investigative tools. One tells; another listens. Through exchange of human agency, “that was also the significant contribution of the new narrative research” (p.214), one reveals as another probes.

### *Interviewing*

No discussion of narrative research—specifically interviewing’s contribution to human study—should ignore its interactive nature. Although an interviewee’s freedom varies according to the type of interview—unstructured, semi-structured, or structured (Corbin and Morse, 2003)—in all cases he or she

draws from personal experience to answer questions. Unfettered by pursuit of one right answer, the participant roams through memory and emotions forming descriptions and explanations. In response, the interviewer may ask exploratory questions, thus encouraging the participant to search more deeply into his personal history for applicable stories. The assumed purpose for such exchanges is to inform the interviewer, that is, contribute data to his study. However, during this interactive discourse the interviewee learns as well. It is reasonable to expect that a research participant might leave an interview more aware of his beliefs, attitudes, and feelings and possibly more contemplative of his behavior. It was gratifying to me when two of my subjects ended our final interviews on that note.

*Interview environment.*

Unlike controlled laboratory study in which procedure is largely predetermined, narrative interviewing requires an investigator to continuously gauge his subject's motivation and knowledge and choose whether to deflect his respondent's direction, probe more deeply in one area, or simply allow her to continue along her present thought path. The narrative interviewer's task is complicated further by four factors, labeled as challenges by Roulston, deMarrais, and Lewis (2003): (a) unexpected participant behavior, (b) researcher's subjectivities, (c) question composition, and (d) transcript analysis (p. 648).

Despite careful planning by the investigator, actual interview environment may pose an unexpected threat to data procurement. As Roulston et al. suggest, participants may arrive late, eat during the interview, or request a noisy setting

(p. 648), all of which occurred during my spring 2005 pilot study interviews. When arranging this study's interviews, I took care to avoid such data collection challenges. When meeting in hotels, I requested the use of private rooms, and I never met with consultants at meal time.

Bourdeau (2000) suggests that qualitative researchers should attune themselves to three factors inherent in their interviewer/interviewee relationships: power, time, and termination. Power exists between participant and researcher whenever one feels vulnerable to the other's influence. For example, when both actors establish a prior agreement regarding the interview's duration, power is shared, but when the researcher has opportunity to return at will for further observation and/or interviewing, power shifts in his direction. Power is more equally shared also when both parties know how or why their relationship will terminate. In order to enhance research integrity and productivity by avoiding power imbalance, I deliberately signaled my study's participants that I wished to establish equal power relationships. I asked them to choose the time and place for the interviews, stated the expected duration of our interviews, and provided them with printed copies of my open-ended questions. These courtesies successfully established a comfortable, mutually respectful relationship, which in turn made it easier for me to insert impromptu exploratory questions.

Kaufman (1994) presents the narrative interviewer and interviewee as co-producers of the in-depth interview. This theoretical ground for interview structure illuminates but also complicates a researcher's design methodology. If he situates his pre-interview work in Kaufman's idea that "both co-producers will



come to that dialogue with attitudes, values, personal agendas, and conceptual frameworks that find their way into the content of the interview as it unfolds over time” (p. 128), it naturally follows that he should consider those multiple factors as he designs questions. During a researcher’s pre-interview period, he might view his pending interviewees as a small, relatively homogeneous group and strive to develop questions capable of focusing all participants upon a single issue and eliciting easily comparable data. However, if that same researcher recognizes his interviewees’ *groupness* as existent only because he artificially gathered them together, then he will more likely prepare for Kauffman’s varied attitudes, values, agendas, and frameworks.

Carlson and McCaslin (2003) suggest an efficient preparation method—a narrative research strategy that “uses an initial interview protocol and pre-analysis process, called meta-inquiry, prior to developing formal interview protocol” (p. 549). Even though a researcher’s subject pool may consist of participants handpicked for their assumed homogeneity and shared link to the research topic, initial interviews afford them opportunity to “describe their world in their own terms and to provide in-depth details of their successes and concerns on the research topic” (p. 553), a model that dovetails with Kaufman’s (1994) view of researcher and participant as research co-producers. Following the initial interview, Carlson and McCaslin would have the researcher retreat into a period of “coding, interpretation, and valuing of the initial responses [leading to the development of] framing, main, and probing questions” (p. 549), which are then used during subsequent interviews.

As I prepared for data collection, I considered how to meld these concepts into a narrative interview structure supportive of researcher-participant co-production of multiple interviews. I determined that initial interviews would ask interviewees to draw from their career experience to define their beliefs about K-12 schooling. Follow-up interviews would then ask them to define factors of school operation that impact their efficacy and roles they most often choose to play. Information gleaned during the first three interviews would naturally flow into the fourth interviews focused on consulting methods. For example, if during interview 1 a participant said that many principals are well-intentioned but lacking in instructional leadership skills, and if during interview 2 she noted that she often consults privately with principals and during interview 3 she said she preferred to function as a coach, then during interview 4 I might ask her to describe methods she used when privately coaching principals who are weak in instructional leadership skills.

*Interview question delivery.*

Although Kaufman's (1994) view of researcher and participant as interview co-producers is not disputed here, it seems clear that the interviewer bears primary responsibility for creating an interview capable of generating meaningful data. In pursuit of meaningful data collection, I needed to first generate questions which would help each participant frame his or her understanding of K-12 consulting and then offer follow-up questions attuned to the participant's experiential and cognitive base.

Seidman (1991) cautions that narrative researchers must give careful thought to question delivery. He advises interviewers to separate themselves emotionally from respondents' words and to "avoid reinforcing your participants' responses" (p. 67). He suggests that interviewers "listen more, talk less" (p. 56), listening for basic understanding, for the inner "as opposed to the outer, more public voice" (p. 56) and for cues to the participant's energy level and gates through which to "move the interview forward as necessary" (p. 57). When necessary the carefully listening researcher can, in a non-interruptive manner, insert questions intended to guide the participant back to the research focus.

### *Shadowing*

In addition to interviewing all five participants, I shadowed two consultants while they consulted with client schools and found that close proximity to study subjects provided a rich data-filled environment aptly described by McDonald (2005).

Throughout the shadowing period the researcher asks questions which will prompt a running commentary from the person being shadowed.

Some questions will be for clarification....Others will be intended to reveal purpose. During shadowing the researcher will write an almost continuous set of field notes. At the end of the shadowing period the researcher will have a rich, dense and comprehensive data set which gives a detailed, first-hand and multidimensional picture of the role, approach, philosophy and tasks of the person being studied. (p. 456)

Although observation research is recognized today as a legitimate qualitative research technique, “there are problems with reliability and generalizability.” (Brown, n.d., p. 1)). In choosing to observe only two consultants, I am cognizant of the fact that my small sample population weakens generalizability. Dandekar (2005), however, notes that “planners choose methods for a given situation not just in terms of which will yield the most facts” (p. 134). It was for the purpose of deepening my understanding of consultants’ roles and preparing to interrogate practices by which they fulfill those roles that I included shadow-observation in this study design. Data collected through observation both deepened my pool of new understanding and also enriched the questioning that I was prepared to execute during post-observation interviews.

#### *Audio Tapes, Emails, and Informal Conversations*

Although I invited four study subjects to record their thoughts about consulting on audio tapes, only one did so. Two others accepted the recorders but returned them unused, and the fourth said she would prefer not to record as she was currently preoccupied with changes in her job description. The consultant who did use a recorder chose her discussion topics freely with no guidance from me. She simply spoke about elements of consulting that were on her mind. On one tape she even addressed a topic that her husband suggested out of his observation of her work.

All five consultants responded helpfully when I found it necessary to email or call with follow-up clarifying questions. They were always gracious and patient and seemed genuinely willing to answer thoughtfully. Also, on occasion I was

able to learn more about consulting during informal conversations between interviews, over lunch on shadowing days, and while riding in consultants' vehicles from one consulting venue to another.

### *Data Collection Sequence*

Consultants participating in this study were asked to complete a preliminary survey that was emailed to them prior to their first interviews. This brief survey yielded data about each participant's career history. It inquired about: (a) career experience prior to consulting, (b) number of years as a consultant, (c) full-time or part-time involvement, (d) number of school districts typically contracted with each year, (e) frequency of work with rural, suburban, or urban schools, as well as elementary, middle school, or high school, and (f) client-school needs most frequently served by the consultant. Data collected through this survey helped me situate participants in the field of consulting.

Following completion of the surveys, interviewing began. All five subjects participated in identically focused interviews:

- Interview 1

What are commendable consultants' beliefs about schooling and themselves as agents of school change?

- Interview 2

What are commendable consultants' beliefs about factors that impact their ability to effect lasting school change?

- Interview 3

What roles do commendable consultants play as agents of school change?

- Interview 4

What practices do commendable consultants adopt to effect lasting school change?

### Data Analysis

In-depth analysis began as I transcribed 20 recorded interviews and the taped narrative monologues contributed by one participant. As Bird (2005) suggests, the act of transcribing spoken words is political. "Just as talk is a social act, so too is transcription" (p. 227). Because the transcriber is "a social and political being" (p. 228), his work is subjective. He must listen to inflective and transfer it to the flat, written page. To accomplish this, he first must interpret what he hears and second choose writing conventions which allow him to note that inflection. This is not an easy task since in addition to transcribing words, he must also interpret the respondent's silences and non-language sounds such as laughter or exhaled derision, gauge their importance to the transcript, and find a way to accurately portray them in text.

My transcription and analysis process occurred in two distinct stages. As I began interview tape transcription, I determined to code, sort, and store data immediately so that information would be readily retrievable. First, I entered interview transcripts into NVivo (See Appendix A), a computer based qualitative data analysis software (Ozkan, 2004). I established an NVivo node for Interview

1, but then immediately began creating sub- nodes as the participants spoke through the transcripts. The act of determining as I typed what the subject was talking about resulted in continuous forming of new NVivo nodes and coding data to those nodes. Not a single transcript line was left out of this process. Eventually, coding “trees” graphically displaying participants’ categorized ideas were developed (Ozkan, 2004; Walsh, 2003). As I continued transcribing and assigning text to NVivo nodes, I understood that for this first step, I was categorizing data by what the participants talked about, rather than what they said; and I recognized that although computer based qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo alone cannot guarantee rigorous study, “the way researchers handle their data using these programs does add rigor” (Ozkan, p. 590). Keeping this in mind, I was now ready to access data stored in NVivo, but to move beyond its categorical limits.

After all of the transcripts had been coded in NVivo, I began examining each transcript for evidence of what participants were actually saying. The NVivo framework made me cognizant of what they were talking about, and it now helped me to re-organize data into a structure that would aid analysis of what had been said. This process simultaneously gathered participants’ collective input on single concepts while forcing continuous comparison and contrast of elements contributed by diverse interviewees. This second, more intimate examination of participants’ thoughts revealed gaps in my understanding and led to follow-up phone calls and emails through which I requested additional information.

This dual process of first categorizing participant responses and then contemplating what they were saying as they addressed multiple categories revealed patterns in the data. For example, I saw that participants freely discussed their lack of power as consultants, that they approached this issue while responding to various categorical questions, and that they did so in all four interviews. The process of coding data categorically first and then drawing from multiple categories to illuminate consultants' common beliefs and concerns helped me realize that consultants instinctively returned to issues important to them regardless of how categorically the questions were framed.

Bird (2005) distinguishes between interpretation—understanding a participant's meaning—and analysis—searching through one or more respondents' word clusters for examples of a particular phenomenon. Both steps challenge the researcher's reflectivity (p. 231), as he must continuously weigh responses' value to his particular study. Transcript analysis forces researchers beyond mere copying, interpreting, and coding interviewees' responses. While focusing on participants' words, researchers must simultaneously attune themselves to personal subjectivities, identifying how and why they are valuing and devaluing particular transcript components. To maintain research integrity, I returned repeatedly to this study's statement of purpose and checked to be sure that I was continuously listening for data pertinent to my original need to know.

The remaining chapters of this paper report research findings. Chapter 3 introduces the study participants. While maintaining confidentiality through use of pseudonyms and careful guarding of identifying data, I attempted to introduce



them to my readers in such a personal way that readers would be able to visualize them when they spoke through interview transcripts. Chapter 4 examines basic characteristics of my five study participants. Termed *the essence of commendable consultants*, they are fundamental features that gradually surfaced as interviewees spoke at length about their beliefs, motivation, and function. Chapter 5 describes the participants' beliefs about school-consultant partnering. Although stated as beliefs, contextually they illuminate feelings expressed by the consultants about their separate and unequal relationship with client schools. Chapter 6 reports factors said by consultants to bear great influence upon their opportunity to effect lasting change in client schools. Grouped into three categories—leadership, educators' beliefs, and professional learning communities—they examine attitudes, behavior, and actions that define the environment in which consultants work. Chapter 7 identifies roles which consultants play while fulfilling their duties, roles they may carry from client to client or roles they may adopt to meet specific school needs. Chapter 8 describes methods reported by participants to be most effective in carrying out their roles. In telling about their methods, the consultants explain how they respond to various conditions described in previous chapters. Finally, Chapter 9 features implications of this study, suggests further areas of study, and encourages improved school-consultant partnerships.

Five K-12 school reform consultants were selected for this study. All were commendable consultants who enjoy reputations for professional skill and efficacy. They were recommended by persons who had first-hand knowledge of

their work, including a deputy superintendent of education in an eastern state, an assistant dean of a department in a university's college of education, and two division directors within a Midwest state department of education. In addition to these referrals by accomplished educators, there were further selection criteria detailed in the following chapter where the five consultants who participated in this study are introduced with pseudonyms.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE PARTICIPANTS

Five K-12 school reform consultants were selected for this study. All were commendable consultants who enjoy reputations for professional skill and efficacy. They were recommended by persons who had first-hand knowledge of their work, including a deputy superintendent of education in an eastern state, an assistant dean of a department in a university's college of education, and two division directors within a Midwest state department of education. In addition to these referrals by accomplished educators, selection criteria included:

- prior work experience as a teacher and/or administrator in either the public or private K-12 sector.
- a minimum of three years consulting experience.
- self-employment or employment with a model provider or a state department of education as opposed to employment with a single school district.

### Introducing Ann

Ann, a tall, slender, soft-spoken woman whose youthful appearance belies her age, has spent a lifetime in public education. She graduated first from an urban public high school and then earned bachelor and master's degrees from a state university. She worked in a large urban district for 31 years, first as an elementary teacher primarily in grades 4 and 5 and later as a curriculum director and staff coordinator. As her retirement approached, she "felt it was incumbent

upon [her] to utilize her 31 years of experience as an educator to continue to help improve student achievement.” She was offered an opportunity to develop resource materials featuring practical strategies that schools might use to shape and sustain improvement initiatives. Later she was asked to be the consultant responsible for rolling out the materials. Employment with her state’s department of education followed. She works there half time and consults privately half time. She works out of three sites: an office in her state capital, an office in a district building near her home, and an office in her home. Of course, many days she is on-site in a client school.

At the time that we began our interviews, Ann was traveling throughout her Midwest state consulting with 50-60 urban, suburban, and rural school districts and working with staff at all K-12 levels. She served as a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) consultant, providing technical support for persons attempting to implement their CSR grant and monitoring compliance with CSR funding stipulations. She most often met with improvement teams or building principals. She had to thoroughly understand stipulations attached to the CSR grant so that she could provide accurate answers when districts called with application questions. Because districts that competed successfully for CSR funds were allowed to work with the model provider of their choice, Ann also had to be thoroughly familiar with over 20 model providers. She had to understand their operating guidelines and methods so that she could intervene if either a district or a provider reported insufficient progress.

As Ann talked about her consulting practice, she hinted at a distinct difference between her obligation as a grant compliance monitor and that of other consultants who monitor for student achievement. For example, I once asked her where she turns for personal support when she realizes a school is not progressing satisfactorily and she is going to have to take corrective action. Her response surprised me. "I don't know how applicable this is to me currently. If schools are not progressing, they're not really under my guidance. They're under my guidance as far as overseeing the grant." She explained further that when judging a school, her measuring stick is goals that the school put on their grant application. "As long as they are accomplishing most of those and the model provider is comfortable and there's a good relationship, I'm pretty comfortable." Ann was the only participant in my study whose job centered upon one particular federal grant, and she was the only one who referenced grant compliance as an indicator of school achievement or consulting success.

Ann maintained a firm stance toward money; that is, ways in which grant funds were used. "The only time I get concerned is when I see that the money that has been allocated is being inappropriately used and is not being used to support school improvement efforts. Then I have concerns." When that happens, she has conversations with the principal and leadership team as well as with the model providers, and she sometimes calls all parties together. Ann wanted me to understand that whether the issue involved money or inadequate collaboration between the school and model provider or frustration over insufficient progress, her goal was to be supportive, not punitive. She said that she "wanted to be a

ladder instead of a hammer.” In such cases, she stepped in to remind districts about agreements they had made with their chosen model provider, and she also helped providers understand and cope with school personnel issues.

In addition to her state department of education work as a CSR monitor, Ann also consults privately with some districts. In that capacity, she is more diverse. She has many clients who receive her services because they have been identified as high priority schools for failure to make adequate yearly progress and are required to seek support and professional development. Ann characterizes that segment of her consulting practice as process consultation. Unlike her CSR monitoring work, Ann resists impulses to state her opinion. Instead she searches for questions most likely to place her clients into a reflective mode of thinking. She wants clients to identify problems and talk their way through to solutions while she sits by their side.

As our interviews neared completion, Ann's career was taking yet another turn. She was transitioning from being a CSR monitor into a department of education regional consultant position that would allow her to do less traveling and serve 29 districts closer to her home. She was joining a team of consultants who would share responsibility for all of the public schools and charter schools in one area of her state. In preparation, she was familiarizing herself with funds other than CSR, learning how schools would apply and how they would be allowed to use those funds. “I just need to wrap my arms around that so I can get some clarity.”

When Ann is not consulting, she remains busy. She is married and the mother of a college-age son. She teaches an on-line college course, and she enjoys reading historical fiction, dancing, walking, and bowling. At the time of this writing, she was trying to top her highest score of 225. As Ann's interviews proceeded, I noticed the exceptionally kind tone she used when speaking of clients. When I commented on the generous way in which she described even low-achieving schools, she explained that educators are often criticized in spite of the "very challenging responsibility they have." Her personal goal is to provide resources and to give them needed support in as kind a way as possible.

#### Introducing Ed

Ed is a tall man with slightly receding dark hair, a mustache, and a neatly trimmed beard. He speaks boldly and rapidly; yet, as I re-listened to his interview transcripts, I heard a man who also finds time for quiet contemplation which he explained he enhances through music and reading. He owns an extensive library and music CD collection. Golf and yard work provide a welcome hands-on break from literary pursuits, and he personalizes professional travel by searching for collectable Native American artifacts and photographs. During one interview he spoke at length about his collection of Edward Curtis prints, sounding as though he enjoys the hunt as much as the find since it sometimes takes him to out-of-the-way shops.

Ed was educated first in a parochial school, but while still an elementary child he began attending urban public schools. He embarked on his career as a

high school teacher in a large urban district and became an administrator in a building that served 5,000 students. He supervised a program for 17- to 19-year olds who had dropped out of school at age 16. This unique program offered students a weekly paycheck for work they completed in trades classes provided they made significant progress in language arts and math classes. Ed later moved to a mid-size city where he held educational as well as city and state government administrative positions for 22 years. He has consulted independently for 12 years.

Ed's career is the most varied of the five consultants. His diverse consulting partnerships link him to a national educational leadership program, to his state's department of education, to universities, and to local school districts. He has served on a number of state and national advisory boards and participated in work groups addressing multiple educational issues. Some of this wide ranging advisory work attaches him to one project for many years and involves periodic travel. Other partnerships, such as those with universities, last from months to one or two years during which he may train a single, albeit large, cohort. At other times, Ed agrees to one- or two-day engagements ranging from keynoting a conference to auditing seriously failing schools. He also consults with about five mostly rural districts each year. He never consults with teachers on classroom issues; instead he interacts solely with administrators or leadership teams either in single school buildings or in larger venues. Not all of Ed's work is so highly visible. In his home office, he spends numerous hours designing



training curricula which he and others use when conducting leadership workshops.

Ed is the only participant whom I never met in person. Although I offered to travel to his office, he told me that he was glad to provide data through telephone interviews and emails. Perhaps the lack of visual contact helped me tune in to his energetic, confident manner of speaking which I noticed in the first minute of our first interview. After our fourth and final interview was completed, I called again and asked him to consider the source of his confidence. He credited it largely to two trainings that he underwent early in his consulting career. One was conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (See Appendix A). Prior to the week-long session, he submitted 18 self-assessments which were scored by psychologists called feedback givers. During the week, he was watched through one-way mirrors while he interacted with others on assigned time-bound tasks. During the week's final four hours, his feedback giver explained his assessment scores and analyzed strengths and weaknesses viewed during interactive tasks.

Ed's second training, conducted by University Associates (See Appendix A), consisted of three 9-day cycles which were so intense that they were interspersed with 2-month breaks. During the first cycle, his strengths and weaknesses were once again analyzed. The second cycle was given to small group work, and the third to understanding groups within institutions. Ed concluded, "I know what my strengths are because they've been documented. People have seen them. I'm very comfortable going in wherever I go to do whatever I do." Today Ed not only trains school leaders; he also teaches others

how to train leaders, and he even steps back one more level to instruct those who teach trainers.

During the weeks in which I called Ed periodically for interviews, he was wrapping up several projects. Some involved school districts in his home state, but twice I delayed interviews because he was traveling to the East and then the West Coast for week-long engagements. This three-month time window revealed the varied nature of Ed's independent consulting practice. Projects ranged in scope from microscopically investigating one district's budget issues to collaborating with a nation-wide school leadership study group. It might be said that his work took him from the most negative to the most positive aspects of school improvement endeavors. Asked to expose root causes of school failure, he conducted intense audits of his state's worst failing schools, but he also completed a multi-month training series with enthusiastic new school improvement coaches. (He periodically launches a new training series with a cadre of persons interested in transitioning into educational consultant careers.) Between two of our interviews, he became a trainer of trainers. He worked with consultants from a large teacher association showing them how to prepare trainers who would, in turn, teach school coaches to support teachers. Thus, his expertise was reaching through consultants to trainers to coaches to teachers. Ed seemed to thrive in his intensely varied work environment. He "tries to work only 100 days per year," and has no plans to seek permanent employment with a model provider or state department of education. He commented that as projects near completion, new requests for his services always arrive.

### Introducing Eve

Eve, a graying auburn haired woman, grew up in a major city, the same city where she eventually enacted her public education career. Her parents were second generation immigrants from Russia and Italy who valued family and schooling. She also spent summers with relatives who lived in the country and farmed. "I got to appreciate the life of both and experience the heart of good people who took pride in their work and wouldn't do anything but their best." She attended parochial schools through grade 12 and then a parochial college. From both family and teachers, expectation that she would do her best was high. She recalls that even when she student taught, she was quickly entrusted with classes when teachers were absent.

Eve's career history affirms the aura she projects today as an energetic woman exuding good cheer and confidence. During her 16 years in K-6 classrooms, she attempted to change grades every two years because she "wanted to learn the curriculum for each grade and to see how the curriculum impacted various developmental stages of learning for children." She eagerly learned best practices, piloted new programs for her school, and created a reading lab that serviced Title 1 students. Eventually she was given a reduced class schedule so she could work as a staff developer, a position that provided opportunity to learn how to support classroom teachers.

Eve never worked as a building principal, because while yet a staff developer she was invited to begin developing a professional development plan

“that would impart good instructional practices across the district.” After gaining a few years’ experience, she attended school in the evenings, earned an administrator’s degree, completed an internship, and became a district senior administrator for curriculum instruction and professional development. She worked with a superintendent and deputy superintendent in a large urban district which served thousands of students and ultimately enjoyed recognition for its remarkable growth in student learning. Her contribution as a member of that three-person administrative team centered upon training administrators to become instructional leaders. Eve says, “I found my niche.” Evaluating and coaching building principals became her forte. Eventually she became deputy superintendent of her district.

Although she has officially been an independent consultant for only four years since retiring from administration, she says that due to her previous experience it feels like she has been consulting for 20 years. She has helped teachers, principals, and staff developers learn to evaluate and teach best practices. After her district established a highly respected reputation for its coaching ability, she was asked by other districts to mentor them, and she did so on holidays and during summer vacations. Rather than tire her, she felt energized. “I managed to work, go to school, and be a wife and mother to seven kids” (two children born to her and five step-children). And as Eve points out, she is still going.

In her present refashioned career devoted to consulting, Eve chooses to be hands on, working in her client schools rather than conducting workshops.

When she does speak to groups, she prefers an audience of leadership teams whom she follows to their buildings to support their implementation process. When she enters into partnerships with client schools, she likes to be aligned with one specific person who agrees to oversee implementation efforts between her visits, and she strives to work closely with local leadership so that initiatives can be sustained after she is gone. Although much of her work is in urban settings, she also consults in a more rural state, usually with elementary or middle schools. She feels more effective when working with district leadership, but often finds superintendents negligent about maintaining long-term involvement and, therefore, interacts most frequently with building administrators. She seldom consults in the classroom and instead focuses on the organization's plan and those leaders responsible for implementing the plan.

While describing her typical work environment, Eve explained that she attempts to avoid school politics. She noted that some leadership teams serve as "a kind of information network," carrying information back and forth between teachers and principals. Although Eve will present to such teams or monitor their meetings if the principal asks her to, she prefers to be "more involved in a professional development venue, rather than school politics." The leadership teams Eve likes to service are those "identified as lead staff developers, or folks they depend on to move the professional development." She prepares staff developers to conduct training at teachers' grade level team meetings or school-wide faculty workshops held during the school year or summer. Eve supports such teams by "building agendas, gathering research articles, coaching lessons

for video taping, bringing books, developing handouts etc....many things that will support what needs to get done."

Although, Eve's consulting focus is upon training school leaders, she noted that this is seldom the door through which she enters client schools. "Leadership support alone is rarely funded via any grants." She explained that spending money to train administrators is considered "a bit of a luxury," especially since "most school boards feel they should already know what they need to know to do the job." Eve has found that grants given to improve student achievement are often geared toward literacy or math and usually include funding that may be used for professional development of teachers. Because Eve believes that "leadership is crucial to the success of any professional development initiative" and, therefore, "leadership is crucial to student success," she understands that she must work with school leaders even if that is not in the grant language. Although the official request for her services usually asks her to create instructional change, Eve knows that long-term improvement must encompass training principals to operate as instructional leaders. "This is generally clarified when I first come on board and have initial conversations with the powers that be." Eve explained further,

I would say the training of the principal is often subtle, but not hidden. It all depends on the comfort level of the principal, the belief system they have in place about what creates change and the time commitment the principal is willing to make. My personal agenda always includes the principal. It also includes the superintendent and district curriculum folks, but does not

always work out that way [meaning they often distance themselves from her consultation].

Eve added that even when she is in a room supposedly training teacher leadership teams, she wants the principal and assistant principal to be there so she can model for them. She wants them to "carry through when I am not there." She used an interesting term to explain her goal. "I try to support the principal and assistant principal, so they create an *instructional eye* and continue to monitor the teaching and learning long after I am gone." Eve attempts to drive her training deep into the school culture by leaving principals "with structures that support continuous professional development that create a culture of community and learning." Eve concluded somewhat wistfully, "If the principal is a good student and really sees himself or herself as an instructional leader rather than just an administrator, they gain a lot. I wish I could say that I have always had success in all places."

Today, Eve's reputation, developed during her years with the district that achieved and sustained remarkable student achievement, goes before her. She is often hired by non-profit organizations that "contract with school systems and don't always have the expertise to help the schools themselves or need guidance in doing that." She feels that her reputation is sustained today by her continued drive for justice. "I guess it is that sense of justice that makes me so concerned about good education and what drives me when I see anything less than what kids deserve." As our interview window came to a close, Eve was completing a 3-year contract with one state and launching a long-term agreement in another

state to teach a cohort of trainers who would, in turn, prepare others to work as on-site school improvement coaches.

Eve doesn't work every minute. She and her husband own a home on a lake along with a boat. She says she is not an arts and crafts person, but she enjoys walking and bike riding and she "putter[s] in the flower garden." Although flying is "not [her] favorite thing," she would like some day to visit Italy, the home of her immigrant father.

### Introducing Sheryl

Sheryl grew up in Midwest suburbia attending public schools. She married her high school sweetheart and postponed college while her three children were born and her husband completed his college degree. Eventually she earned a teaching degree from a well-known Midwest university. She also completed a master's degree and, more recently, all of the course work toward a doctorate; however, due to the demands that consulting makes upon her time, she does not plan to complete the dissertation portion of her doctorate program.

Sheryl does not allow professional demands to overshadow family relationships. She and her children and grandchildren enjoy a new lake house, and they sometimes travel together to warm climates to scuba dive. She and her husband also like to travel to wine country with friends who share their interest in art shows and restaurants. Having acknowledged in an email the pleasure she finds through family and friends, she commented, "I also understand how important working is to me." She tries not to be a workaholic, but thinks others



may view her so. "Certainly, I'm perceived as having energy and passion for what I do."

Sheryl's 16 years teaching in Midwest elementary and middle school classrooms were followed by another 16 at building and district level administrative posts, including principal, adult and community ed director, deputy superintendent, and one year as interim superintendent. During those years, she took the opportunity to participate in a variety of community initiatives, some of which involved international travel and broadened her understanding of community needs. A superintendent for whom she worked was "visionary" and encouraged her to undergo extensive professional development and to promote many of the reforms of the late 80's and early 90's. Upon retiring from public education, Sheryl began consulting privately and also entered into community support volunteer work where she endeavored to build "the capacity of others to contribute to their lives and to the community at large." Her desire to leave people better able to carry on improvement initiatives seems fundamental to Sheryl's approach to consulting. During our interviews she frequently referenced building capacity in client schools for enduring change.

Sheryl has consulted for eight years and presently co-directs the state office of a well-known model provider. She consults annually with approximately 30 high poverty rural and urban elementary, middle, and high schools where she is most often engaged in school-wide reform initiatives and typically works with principals and leadership teams on systemic rather than individual classroom issues. Sometimes Sheryl serves as the lead consultant and pulls in colleagues

from her organization team as she needs them. Other times she functions in background support of their work. She administers the organization, sets strategic vision, develops the board of directors, and encourages her organization's consultants as well as clients to learn continually. She purposefully models learning and coaching. Although all of my subjects periodically team with colleagues to support specific schools, Sheryl is the only one who meshes her own consulting with official supervision of other consultants.

When Sheryl decided to retire from public school education, she chose to join a model provider with which she had grown familiar while administrating. Because she had worked in a district that aggressively sought restructuring grants during the early nineties, she had "the privilege of being able to interact with almost all of the gurus of school reform at that time." This exposure heightened her understanding of various reform premises and guided her toward the model provider for which she presently works. In choosing an employer, an important criterion for Sheryl was that the model would allow her to address client school issues as systemic issues. Even though a client may originally view a problem as perhaps a curricular or grade level matter, Sheryl helps them understand that all staff members need to learn about the problem and contribute toward its solution. She finds that a systemic approach hastens the organization's willingness and ability to direct resources toward the matter at hand.

Although Sheryl's business-like ability to direct a state-wide model provider program was clearly evident, while I interviewed and shadowed her she

also exhibited a warm, nurturing nature. She maintained a calm, open demeanor that invited colleagues, client staff, and parents to approach her. She quickly entered into the spirit of contributing to my research, and when I shadowed her she frequently stepped aside during events to speak to me. During one shadowing day she was experiencing severe back pain, but she continued to graciously answer every question, explaining her procedures and giving me her analysis of the client school's condition. When I asked if she would care to discuss the roots of her gracious professionalism, she responded, "It is all about the kids and I believe so strongly in the power of education and a good teacher. They can change lives. We can change lives." She said that from her teenage years she has "been intrinsically rewarded for getting things done that have a positive impact on a school, community, or individual."

As the weeks during which I shadowed and interviewed Sheryl passed, she brought closure to her consultant relationship with one district and intensified her efforts with others. Having learned that the Comprehensive School Reform grant would be funded only one more year, she was retooling client schools for faster implementation of improvement initiatives. This was causing some anxiety among school leaders, so Sheryl was attempting to balance reassurance with acknowledgement that, yes, improvement structures such as leadership teams and revised schedules would have to be framed at a faster rate than ever before. She made it clear to me that she had no intention of leaving the job half done because funding was dwindling. In response to partnerships possibly ending sooner than anticipated, she vowed to find ways to quickly prepare school

leaders to sustain improvement endeavors. While I shadowed her during client training events, I noted her serious demeanor as she stood off to the side with me and quietly spoke of her determination to help schools through difficult economic times, even though she was also facing uncertainties for her own model provider organization due to pending funding changes.

### Introducing Yvonne

When I met Yvonne for the first time, I noticed her carefully coiffed light brown hair, her attractive make-up and jewelry, and her overall neat appearance which I came to view as the face on a thoroughly professional woman. My early awareness of Yvonne's appearance eventually came full circle, because in her final email to me she talked about her appearance. She said that adolescence brought about severe acne and self-loathing, changing her from a confident, gregarious, talented child to a withdrawn, studious teenager who disliked junior high and high school intensely. She had no social life during high school and experienced the same void at a large state university. She moved back home to attend a smaller college convinced that "I was never going to make it on my looks, so I better do something with my talents and brain." This revelation by Yvonne in our final correspondence surprised me, since by then I had seen her several times in settings with colleagues and other educators. She invariably stood out as an attractive, nicely dressed, confident leader.

Yvonne was the middle child of three, seven years younger than her sister and nine years older than her brother. She became a "live in babysitter" for him,

a role which she enjoyed. She entertained him with costumes and baking and held summer backyard art classes for him and neighborhood kids. Eventually, her older sister became an art student at a state university. Yvonne visited campus and "knew something great could be there for me" and that she "wanted to participate in it." Unfortunately, her sister dropped out of college and her parents, blaming the art school environment, refused to allow Yvonne to attend. With that, her dream of one day being an artist ended.

Yvonne eventually began an elementary education college major on the advice of adults who recalled her success with her brother and the neighborhood children. She completed an accelerated program and began her career in education at age 21. In the beginning, she got bumped from job to job due to low seniority. She disliked that, but now looks back upon it as a time when she developed resiliency and the ability to remain focused in the midst of turmoil. Elementary teaching was somewhat healing to Yvonne's battered self-esteem since children liked her and accepted her. She discovered that teaching provided an outlet for artistic talents that she would have pursued in college had she not been thwarted by her parents. She began allowing her job to be her driving force, a pattern she has continued throughout her career. Along the way she earned a master's degree in reading and a specialist degree in school administration. Today she values being thorough, prepared, accurate, and polished "over everything."

Yvonne's 30-year public education career was divided quite evenly between teaching elementary and middle school students and administration at

the building and district level, including work as a *principal*, *personnel director* and assistant superintendent. Following her retirement five years ago, she began consulting part time for her state's department of education and part time as an independently employed school improvement consultant. In a year's time she typically works with approximately 50-60 districts and devotes equal time to rural, suburban, and urban districts, usually in elementary or middle schools. Although some schools approach her independently, many are partnered with her because they are located in the region assigned to her by her state's department of education. As she commented, she doesn't choose them and they don't choose her. The majority of her work is with administrators and leadership teams from high needs schools. Although she visits classrooms to discern need, she does not consult at length with classroom teachers.

Yvonne's consulting settings vary considerably. As a regional consultant, she periodically calls leaders from all of her districts together in region-wide gatherings during which she explains procedural and compliance matters. In preparation, she creates handout materials intended to increase attendees' understanding and coordinates her regional colleagues into a presentation team. She chairs such meetings and presents major segments. In a less visible role, when necessary Yvonne calls specialists together to support a particular district. They may come from regional and state offices or they may be content specialists. As the support supervisor, Yvonne informs this team and oversees development of a support plan for the district under scrutiny. This is done away from school campuses. However, much of her consulting occurs on-site as she

meets with building administrators and leadership teams or observes classrooms. When it seems helpful, such work culminates in staff-wide sessions with client schools during which she reports her findings and leads discussions.

During our interviews and shadowings, I came to appreciate Yvonne's energetic but modulated let's-get-it-done manner. I watched her share collegial humor in relaxed settings, document details during team planning sessions, decipher regulations for a large multi-district audience and, most amazingly, deliver a stunning rebuke interlaced with ringing challenge to a room full of district leaders. She continually reminded school personnel that schools are for kids. I understood this better when she told me about her favorite teacher. "My 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was the first adult to tell me how smart I was (actually showed me my file and all my test scores over the years and comments teachers had placed in my file)." This teacher worked with another teacher to create a special program for Yvonne, told her that she had leadership skills, and even invited her to join a family trip to an art museum. "I had never had an adult, or anyone for that matter, ever talk to me like that or tell me I had anything special to offer, not even my own parents." It is clear that Yvonne does not want other children to lack confidence and feel as isolated as she did.

In the weeks that I shadowed and interviewed Yvonne, she was working not only with many districts as a state department of education consultant, but also with one district as a private consultant. This came about because after she completed a study for this district and delivered a hard-to-hear analysis, they appreciated her forthrightness and asked her to return to guide them through

improvement initiatives. Over time she developed many productive professional relationships and even some close friendships with personnel from that district. When I first met Yvonne, she said the district was hoping to have her return another year if funding remained available. However, some weeks after our interviews were finished I made a follow-up phone call to Yvonne and learned that her partnership with this district had ended and she planned to begin working full time for her state's department of education.

Although Yvonne played several instruments and enjoyed drawing, painting, and pottery during her school years, professional demands have prevented her from continuing artistic pursuits. She feels those talents are now lost, but she continues to enjoy all kinds of music except country-western and rap. She also knits, cooks, bakes, and gardens. She and her husband like to travel, and periodically invite grandchildren and Yvonne's elderly mother to accompany them.



## CHAPTER FOUR: THE ESSENCE OF COMMENDABLE CONSULTANTS

During the course of my interviews with consultants, I did not ask, "What is your essence?" Nor did any participant ever say to me, "This is my essence." Yet, my need to understand the basic nature of exemplary consultants drove this research. Essence: "the attributes by means of which something can be ... identified as being what it is" (Mish, 1991, p. 425). It seemed that essence was precisely what I was seeking. I wanted to know how one could identify the most talented, the most effective educational consultants, and this generated a search for their attributes. As the interviews progressed, and especially as I read and re-read interview transcripts, I discovered that my study participants had revealed themselves in a tapestry woven throughout their responses. Even when answering questions of the most pragmatic nature such as those regarding methods, these commendable consultants illuminated fundamental natures which fashion their consulting practice.

This chapter delineates the essence of respected consultants by reporting characteristics revealed by study participants. It first names attributes identified by the consultants when I asked them to describe their change agent qualities. The chapter then explains additional attributes that surfaced as respondents talked about their work. Their self-directed pursuit of learning for themselves is described, as is their drive to reach through adult educators to attain student learning. Next, the consultants' fundamental belief in public school educators' good intentions is highlighted. Two reports complete this chapter: participants'

insistence upon data rather than opinion and their understanding of consulting as process.

### Commendable Consultants Possess a Clear Sense of Their Change Agent Attributes

Holtz and Zahn (2004) suggest that despite temporary parameters imposed by ever-changing consultant-client agreements, each consultant must determine his permanent identity. “*Only* you can define the term [consultant] for yourself and for what you do” (p. 6). They advise consultants to illuminate a definition of themselves and to deliberately project that image to potential clients who seek a match for their perception of the general term *consultant*. “You can sell successfully only to the client’s perception and the client’s *expectations*, not to your own” (p. 8). Although I assumed it might be difficult for my study’s participants to explain their consulting nature (Lippitt, 1978), I asked each one to describe his or her change agent attributes. All five seemed to possess a clear sense of themselves as agents of change and were able to portray what they perceived to be their essence in detail. When asked to identify personal attributes that helped them bring about school change, in every case the consultant became quiet for a moment and then responded thoughtfully but confidently. None demonstrated this more so than Ed.

I have really good—some would even say great—facilitation skills. So it’s very, very easy for me to get rapport with a group. I’m good at that. I’ve been doing it for a long time. I’ve got over 42 years in public education, the

last twelve as a consultant. And I've been through a lot of training—group dynamics, group facilitation, all that kind of stuff. So I kind of know what I'm doing.

I'm non-threatening. I don't go in with a personal agenda. I don't go in thinking this group needs my help and therefore create a one-up, one-down position status imbalance with them. I try to keep an equilibrium and keep it open. At the same time listen carefully. I have pretty good communication skills. I've also been there. I have a great sense of empathy because I've done this work. I've been a classroom teacher, a building administrator, a central office administrator, an associate superintendent, a state department supervisor. I know how hard this work is. But I also know it can be done.

Ann also viewed herself foremost as a facilitator, but she portrayed a more nurturing nature. "I see myself as a facilitator, and a change agent has to be a facilitator. I see myself as a person who can pull folks together, making sure I have everyone involved." As Ann continued responding to my question about her consultant attributes, she seemed to find her attributes in the behavior of her clients, especially in her capacity to improve their behavior. She spoke of feeling successful when she gets clients to understand change, to be self-reflective, and to experience consensus decision making. "We don't do a lot of voting, but we sit down and have discussions that lead to common understanding and common support." After she returned a second time to the concept of self-reflection, telling how it helps clients move past blaming each other, I asked her where she

had derived that understanding. She replied that as the oldest of seven she “had to be the mediator, the example, try to be the model child.” Later, during university training, she had “an epiphany” when she learned that “we spend a lot of time trying to figure out who is at fault or not taking responsibility for what we can do to make things better.” This moment in her training continues to be a memory that she treasures. “So it’s a wonderful experience for me to be self-reflective myself.”

She explained further that having assimilated self-reflection into her own nature, she no longer views negative group dynamics as “a natural characteristic going on.” Instead, she now encourages client groups to employ self-reflection as a means of removing hindrances such as fault finding. “In many of the schools that are high priority or are in need of transforming, there’s a lot of fault finding, a lot of blaming. Nobody’s taking responsibility. All the time is spent on trying to figure out who’s responsible.” Ann gets them “to be self-reflective...to understand that okay this is who we feel is at fault, but we don’t need to spend a lot of time on that because it’s not productive.” Having adopted self-reflection as a change agent attribute, Ann seems to enjoy teaching it to clients intent upon school change. “It helped me to identify what the [change] process was and then to refine it.”

Both Sheryl and Eve exuded confidence in their consulting abilities. Sheryl said, “My personality profile is one where I have a pretty high level of confidence in my efficacy. I tend to be a risk taker. I have a philosophy that nothing ventured, nothing gained. I don’t like failing obviously, but I bounce back.”

In a later email, Sheryl wrote that she didn't feel she had adequately explained her sense of change agent self. She wanted me to understand that she owns a strong sense of purpose focused on student achievement and that she knows she possesses skills needed for successful consulting: listening, strategic planning, analytical problem solving, and presenting "new ideas and/or research and experiences." She is able to "see the big picture but can break it down into doable chunks," so that she can "plan the work and work the plan." Sheryl was my only participant who worked for a model provider, and she commented that she "would struggle with dealing with a model that is too narrow. I think you have to go in on all fronts." To do so, she utilizes her ability to guide clients toward both data-driven decisions and participatory decision making.

For Eve, cognizance of her reputation as a successful former administrator fed her confidence.

I am usually sought after by systems that have not been as successful as they should be. Usually people call me because they have done some research on what has been accomplished in my career and under my leadership, so they have a pretty good sense of why they would need to access my services. They don't just look me up in the phone book and call me so to speak. There has been a lot written about my district, and my name is in a lot of that. They have a sense of who they are calling and why they are calling me.

Eve's confidence was also rooted in experiential and researched knowledge about young and adult learners, knowledge which translates into confidence that she knows how to improve learning for students and school staff members.

A lot of that has come through my experience and also through my ability to learn what the adult learner is as well as what the child learner is through study of leadership and change and what constitutes the stages of change. I believe in the role of good instruction, in the life of schools and in the life of the child and I have this kind of help attitude. So I think those are my attributes—basically my own beliefs and my experiences and the fact that I continue to learn and read and grow.

Continuing her list of attributes, Eve named her communication ability, augmented by being a “people person,” able to read people and relate to them because she is “conscious of how it feels to need to change and improve without fear that you haven’t been trying.” Compassion rooted Eve’s confidence. “I have this kind of help attitude. I truly just want to help.” She chuckled as she finished, “I guess I have the personality of a coach. I’m always looking to support someone in what they do.”

When asked about her change agent attributes, Yvonne adopted an energetic, upbeat tone.

I think really between creativity, planning, and experience...maybe some are used more than others, but all three of those have served me extremely well so far. I haven’t gotten into a case yet where I just said I’m not capable. Now whether they want to do what you say or they like what

they're hearing is another matter, but I haven't yet run into something where I've felt I am not capable of even advising this person.

Describing her mix of creativity and organization she continued,

I think I'm a creative kind of person. I wouldn't call myself a risk taker to the degree some people are. I mean I'm not out there jumping out of airplanes or anything, but I'm creative. I can think outside the box, and I don't always understand why everything has to be the way it always was, because I've seen people continue to do things that don't work and won't try other things. That happened to me today. I'm not saying that what I suggested [to clients] was the typical thing you would tell them, but it was a creative option to get them out of a jam. So I can think creatively. I think you need to be creative, and I am.

I'm good at planning. I can organize and plan all kinds of things. If somebody wants to have some training, I start okay we need this, that, and that and when do you want to do it? And I nag until the details are covered. Then when the time comes, all the contingencies have been addressed and everything is in order and it starts. I think if you're going to help other people you have to have some of that. If you talk in too broad or big of terms, you're not giving anybody any directions. You need to be able to plan and think about how time is best used, how resources are best used. What are the contingencies? What could go wrong? Let's be ready for that.

Yvonne noted, "I'm very detail oriented which can be annoying, but it's worked for me so far. I think it helps me balance all my various jobs and my travel." She was the only consultant who referenced the multifaceted busyness of consulting work in the context of attributes. Lant (1981) also underscores consultants' ability to juggle multiple details inherent in consulting. He cautions those thinking of choosing this career, "Consultants are usually troubleshooters, and trouble does not keep regular hours. As a result, life will never be as orderly as it was when you worked a 9-to-5 job." He warns that although some find this liberating, for others, "the constant change is disorienting," and he concludes that "anyone who has always punched a time clock without considering it an indignity probably should not consider a career in consulting" (p. 8).

As Yvonne continued talking, she included experience among the attributes she ascribed to herself.

The other thing is just having experience. I think it's very difficult to do some of these things if you haven't had a wide range of experience [with] issues that central office faces, what teachers face, and what middle management faces. And I've had the good fortune to have had a career where I've experienced all three of those.

Collectively, the interviewed participants named several professional qualities which they believe enhance efficacy. They can be clustered into skills and attributes (inherent characteristics).

- Skills: facilitation, participant involvement, participant coordination, listening, strategic planning, analytical problem solving, presenting,



“reading” people, relating to people, communication, organization, and knowledge acquisition.

- Attributes: self-confidence, creativity, risk taking, recoverability, sense of purpose, detail orientation, experience, reputation, understanding, belief, empathy, and compassion.

Does the successful consultant lock onto certain characteristics and rely heavily upon them in all consulting settings? Those whom I interviewed described their features in umbrella-like terms; that is, they implied that they carry their essence from one client situation to another. In contrast, Holtz and Zahn (2004) advise consultants to “determine what the client expects you to be....Your success in marketing yourself as a consultant depends largely on...how accurately you have assessed the image you must project and how well you have succeeded in projecting that precise image” (p. 8). The participants in my study, however, never hinted that they remake their image either for themselves or for clients. It should be noted that all five consultants positioned their attributes within specific contexts. Sheryl aligned her image with that of the model provider for whom she works, allowing that agency’s principles to define, or at least suggest, her attributes. Eve and Ed depended upon reputations developed through long careers and in Eve’s case through publications. Although Ann and Yvonne both offer private consulting, the majority of their work is performed through their state’s department of education. They both noted that neither they nor their clients choose each other as improvement partners, and they never

suggested that they find it necessary to retool the image they portray to client schools.

It should be noted that all five consultants explained that they do not focus solely on specific curriculum content issues, although Eve commented that low literacy or math assessment scores often open the door for her to partner with a school on systemic leadership issues. Instead they are involved in school-wide improvement initiatives. For all of my subjects, the key partnership players were district and building level administrators and teacher leaders.

#### Commendable Consultants Venerate Self-Directed Learning

Commendable consultant essence also encompasses veneration for self-directed learning manifested through engagement in research, training, renewal, and reflection. Continual knowledge enhancement is indicative of commitment, notes Lippitt (1978). "Does the consultant participate in a professional association, discipline, or educational process to maintain competency?" (p. 94). Fullan (2001a) concurs. "There is an explicit and intimate link between knowledge building and internal commitment on the way to making good things happen" (p. 81). By way of explaining why knowledge accrument is essential for those committed to change, Fullan (p. 81) quotes von Krogh (2000) who believes that knowledge "is closely attached to human emotions, aspirations, hopes, and intention" (p. 30). Brown and Duguid (2000) similarly link knowledge attainment to commitment. "Knowledge is something we digest rather than merely hold. It entails the knower's understanding and some degree of commitment" (p. 120).

The consultants interviewed for this study readily described how they deepen their knowledge and as Fullan, Brown and Duguid, and von Krogh do, they linked such efforts to commitment. In so doing, they revealed why they venerate learning. According to Brown and Duguid, this makes perfect sense, because unlike information which interplays with “interchangeable consumers and processors” (p. 121), knowledge is owned by people. What people know and how they came to know it make each knower unique. Every school improvement consultant carries to clients a unique knowledge set. Their choices about where to seek knowledge, whether to share knowledge, as well as where and when they choose to share it all delineate their commitment to consulting.

Ed noted that he reads professional literature constantly and that although he has “probably 4,000 books on process here at home,” he had recently picked up another one simply because it was new to him. So he thought, “Well, I’ll see what’s in it.” Yvonne explained why she had spent the previous evening attending a seminar regarding new school safety laws. When she is consulting, she doesn’t want to rest on her image as the experienced expert.

You have an obligation to stay on top of everything that’s new. You need to be reading and to stay connected with your various networks if you’re really going to be of any help to a school district. So I think that would be a characteristic that a consultant must have. You really can’t just be skilled at what you were doing as a teacher, for example, and suddenly become a consultant and expect that to be good enough. I think you have to stay updated on what the climate is for schools at this time. And I think it’s

important that one stays on top of the latest research and trends that affect our profession in general. You can have experience and you can have creativity. But you do need to stay on top of things and that means you have to keep going back to school or to seminars or workshops and reading and staying connected with various professional organizations, or you're going to be left in the dust.

When I commented to Sheryl that she seemed research driven, she replied, "Oh, yes, very much so!" She explained that since she works for a model provider, she and her colleagues debrief frequently, learning via each other's experiences with client schools. While on site with clients, they activate data-gathering tools such as end-of-session questionnaires and then disseminate gleaned data during their debriefing sessions. They reflect upon successes and disappointments and hunt together for best practices—all with the goal of deprivatizing their consulting. In addition, Sheryl studies alone at home to become knowledgeable about particular topics that might be helpful to clients. When asked why she continues to study at this relatively late stage in her career, she replied, "New ideas do excite me. I like challenges." Research satisfies her "whole to part way of thinking." She added, "I'm always trying to connect things and to be able to get that big picture. I need that big picture." She explained that through her own research she has recognized that many reform movements and model providers share similar roots in early research going back to the eighties. Thus, her research affords her confidence that the model provider she represents

and, therefore, teaching that she disseminates to clients is well-rooted in nationally recognized expertise.

She explained further that research undertaken to inform herself and her clients appeals to her because it takes on the nature of a project.

I like the notion of projects in that there's a purpose, a set of goals, time lines, a point to be reached in a particular time frame. There are resources to organize and allocate, so it has a lot of intriguing characteristics to it.

That was something I discovered about myself because I would take on projects even as a teenager.

Some time after this interview Sheryl sent a follow-up email. Just as when she discussed her change agent attributes, she once again returned to the theme of serving her clients. "I was rethinking my answer to your question. What I failed to mention was that the goal [for research] has to be of major import, such as truly having an impact on people's quality of life. It's that wanting to make a difference' syndrome.

Eve spoke philosophically about her desire to learn and to continue learning during this later stage in her career.

I really need to make sure that I am an informed person, a person who's always open to learning. I never feel that there's a day that goes by that I haven't learned something or that I can't learn something. I think that I was always seeking that kind of improvement all the time whether it was through courses, whether it was through exchanges with my colleagues, whether it was through reading that I did and research that I did and my

own personal trials and errors in the work that I did. And so I think that you always need to remain an open person and a person who always thinks they can learn and that they should be learning.

The process of recording her thoughts about consulting on audio tape for this study prompted Yvonne to comment on consultants' need for reflection.

I want to start this second tape off by stating that this exercise in recording thoughts and good moments, poor moments, frustrations, joys has been a really good exercise, because I believe that for anyone to be good at what they do, they really need to have time for reflection, to be a reflective practitioner. I've decided since going through this experiment, if you will, that I'm going to get myself one of these little tape recorders and I'm going to make a habit of reflecting my thoughts. I really am enjoying this exercise.

Hearing about Yvonne's renewed commitment to reflection proved to be an encouraging moment during data collection. This was the first hint that my ultimate hope for this research—improved school-consultant partnerships—might be fulfilled.

Self-directed learning is not often featured in literature written to advise consultants, especially learning that might occur through intentional course work or study. One exception is Weiss (2003) who urges consultants to read beyond their field's familiar journals, to read "all kinds of literature and all types of literary criticism on a continual basis" (p. 213).

## Commendable Consultants Pursue Student Learning

A third notable feature of consultant essence manifested during interviews was their dedication to school improvement, which they interpreted to mean dedication to student learning. Eve summarized the remarkable improvement that she and her former administrator colleagues accomplished when her urban district climbed from mid-level ranking in a large city to second, missing first by just tenths of a point. "Each of the three superintendents I worked under never really felt we arrived. He or she always said as long as there was one child still not succeeding we had a job to do. So that's the attitude I walk in with." Opportunity for student learning is a "key thing" to Eve. She describes her scrutiny of client school classrooms.

I want to be able to stand in the doorway and just peruse the room and see if I can tell what kids have been learning for the last day, the last week, the last month if possible. And something in that room or many things in the room should speak to me about that. Otherwise the kids are living in an environment that doesn't support anything that the teacher has been doing.

As an advocate for student learning, Ann asks staff members, "Is what you're doing the best that you can do, the best that you can do for students?" She describes classrooms she hopes to view when she visits schools.

Because my expectations are so high, because I think we are providing a service to our most valuable resource, our children, I expect to see teachers interacting with students; students doing creative things that

have them truly engaged in the learning process. That's what I primarily look for.

Whether it is termed "collective responsibility" (Darling-Hammond, Hightower, Husbands, Lafor, Young, Christopher, 2005, p. 187); "moral purpose" (Fullan, 2001a, p. 13); or "the real goals of education" (Littky, 2004, p. 1), determination to help students achieve drives many educators, as well as the five consultants who contributed to this research. Researchers remind education leaders, who most often engage in school improvement discourse outside of the classroom, to remember their purpose. As Yvonne once exclaimed, "It's all about the kids!"

Yvonne reported that she found one attitude especially worrisome, an attitude that Newman, Rutter, and Smith (1989) say breeds "hopelessness and estrangement from work—the feeling, why even try" (p. 224).

One very disappointing thing that I run into is working with districts that have white middle class teachers who have very low expectations of their poor African-American students. They don't expect them to learn. It's like a silent bigotry. And I've seen that happen much too often in a lot of the districts that I work with. They just don't think their students really can do it and they don't think their parents really care. So they don't really hold themselves accountable. So I think those kinds of beliefs can be very detrimental to any kind of lasting change.

On the flip side when an individual teacher rises above that sort of stuff and says I really care about children and I know kids can learn and I know



I can do it and I'm not restricted by any given textbook; I can use all of my intelligence and creativity to meet the needs of kids, and we're going to make every minute count in this classroom—you see things happen. So I think so much has to do with what they believe about how children can learn and their own ability to get the point across.

Eve also discussed accountability, but in a very different context. She pointed out that consultants might feel somewhat accountable to their client school leadership, especially if they hope to be called upon again. However, since “no one is actually your boss,” a consultant's accountability must originate within herself. Once again, Eve brought her discussion back to student learning. “You're really there because you believe that what you know and what you can support is something that is going to benefit the children.” Yvonne concurred. “All my life I have felt that the purpose for the existence of schools is to serve children. It is not an employment agency to help the economy in a given community. It is to serve students.”

#### Commendable Consultants Believe in K-12 Educators

Although Yvonne and other participants voiced concerns about client staff members' performance, without exception these consultants revealed their fundamental belief in K-12 educators and with that their willingness to devote their careers to aiding teachers and administrators. Ann explained,

I think that as a whole, teachers believe that children can learn. To that I cling! As long as they have that hope that they can help students, then I

want to go in and support them in doing that and help them to provide an environment where that can happen.

Sheryl seemed to speak not only for herself, but also to echo the others. "You have to go in with a presupposition that everyone is well intended. They're there because they, as I, believe that we can make a difference."

Sheryl invited me to accompany her on a visit to a district where she had found the administrators to be compassionate toward their students. She especially wanted me to become acquainted with the district's superintendent. During our visit, when this superintendent offered to drive visitors around her district in a school van, Sheryl encouraged me to go along for the ride. This superintendent, whom I will call Dolly, grew up in the district, moved away, and then was called back by the school board to fill a vacancy when her superintendent father retired. She was deeply attached to her district, which she explained suffered from the highest poverty of any district in her state.

As we circled around on dusty rural roads, I saw a striking contrast between Dolly's sense of place and my sense of void. The district's single town barely existed. There was no stop light and no cohesive shopping district. Only a meager collection of buildings lined the road, the kind you pass by along rural Midwest roads without realizing you've been through a town. Dolly enthusiastically identified each place of business and then headed for the country. For nearly two hours, we zigzagged our way from one corner of the district to another, observing modest homes and numerous deteriorating mobile homes. Fortunately, Dolly never stopped talking. I say fortunately, because it was

pure pleasure to listen to her respectfully and compassionately describe families living in the homes. She seemed to know everyone's family history and current situation. She could tell us about children living in certain homes and what she was trying to accomplish for them. Once she pulled into a driveway to introduce us to a man working in his yard, and we understood that she considered it our privilege to be introduced to him. I won't soon forget this superintendent who believed in her parents and students, who refused to use poverty as an excuse, and who was dedicated to improving children's lives through education. When I recall how strongly Sheryl urged me to meet this superintendent, I better understand her deep regard for her client educators.

Eve attributed her empathy with school staff members to her belief that "for the most part, just like kids, people want to succeed. They want to do well and there's a lot of fear attached to change. I truly believe that once they've seen a different and more improved way, it stays with them." Sometimes the consultants moved beyond belief in staff members' good intentions to admiration. Ann described a recent experience.

I was working with a school last week and the next day they were having a meeting to find out if their school was going to close. But still those folks did a wonderful job of moving forward with their plans for the next year and anticipating that should the school remain open we need to be here with our plan.

The consultants especially empathized with principals. Ed commented,

I understand their problems. No one has ever planned a career that says I want to be the principal of the most dysfunctional school in my school district. Nobody planned that they would be principal of a school where kids aren't making any kind of progress at all. So it's tough and I have a great sense of empathy for them. That's kind of what I go by.

Ed explained that his empathy is rooted in his experience. He once directed an evening program for 17-19 year olds in a large urban warehouse converted into a school. Later, as a central office administrator he was in many school buildings, and as a leadership trainer for nearly 30 years, he has listened to many stories and visited still more buildings. Interaction with this extensive administrator network has settled upon him an appreciation for hard working building principals.

Yvonne and Eve also commiserated with principals whose jobs require them to juggle multiple duties. Yvonne observed, "I think what's happening with principals is that it's extremely difficult for people to be an instructional leader and the manager of the building. It just is." Eve added,

I honestly believe that people go into administration because they believe that they can make a difference in instruction but generally get bogged down in the process of doing that. I really feel they feel they have a higher calling, but they do get lost in that higher calling.

Sparks (1998) suggests that educator behavior is molded not so much by personality as by school "structural and cultural forces" (p. 3). To prove his point he recommends watching children engaged in playing school. Often one will

stand while others sit, thereby mimicking a learned school structure in which the teacher stands and learners sit. "That's not because it's natural for some people to stand up and others to sit down but because that's the way the system is put together....These sorts of things shape human behavior in ways that we do not realize" (p. 3). As Ed, Eve, and Yvonne implied, principals function within a school culture formed upon decades of tradition. These consultants empathized with those who might wish to launch change initiatives, but find it difficult to do so.

Newman, Rutter, and Smith (1989) offer an arena for understanding the consultant's empathy for teachers and principals. They describe a "sense of community [that] conveys a relationship of unity, belonging, and cooperative interdependence among peers that can counteract the fragmentation of work and social isolation" (p. 223). However, they also worry that too often such a school community does not exist and that building educators continue to feel alienated and unable to improve student achievement. As the interviewees spoke sympathetically about teachers and principals, they seemed to agree with Newman, Rutter, and Smith's depiction and to make allowances due to the culture in which building level educators often work.

Having reported consultants' appreciation for staff members' good intentions and hard work, I must also note that consultants clearly understood that they should not get lost in empathy and that they need to maintain objectivity. Eve commented,

As a consultant you have to be very in tune with life in the school. And sometimes people use you as a sounding board from all ends and then you have to see how you're going to take all this information and not play sides but move ahead. You have to be a good listener and you have to be able to read between the lines.

Yvonne stressed the importance of observing staff and placing their behavior within the context of each specific on-site visit. She said that when she visits schools that have not made adequate yearly progress or are not in compliance with grant regulations, staff members know she is there to audit their program and their service implementation. "So, of course, what am I seeing and what do I expect? I expect people are going to perceive me as a police person." Yvonne seemed to be unoffended by staff attitude. "This is us pushing our way in versus being invited in," she explained. "I would expect that people would be very busily looking good. There wouldn't be any interruptions in the hallway, because I know they've been warned I'm coming."

Lippitt (1978) cautions that consultants should avoid undue empathy with clients for very practical reasons. When caught up in excessive empathy, a consultant may unknowingly lose his objectivity. His ability to discern why a client's needs exist or what motivates a client may diminish. Empathy can easily transform into advocacy. If that happens, a consultant may let go of solutions not to the client's immediate liking. In that case, the consultant would become less valuable to the client.

As I repeatedly read interview transcripts and observation notes, however, I noted the balance that my participants struck between empathy for educators and demand for improved performance. For example, Ed who said, "I have a great sense of empathy for them" also emphatically exclaimed that he has changed schools in as short a time as six months and that with hard work, "It can be done!"

#### Commendable Consultants Insist upon Data and Research

Another feature of commendable consultant essence surfaced when I asked participants to think about initial visits to new client schools and then to tell how they expect to find teachers and administrators functioning. Without exception, the participants insisted that they form no prior expectations but, instead, wait for data. All of the consultants seemed to instinctively rely upon data and had trained themselves to delay opinions and decisions until they had opportunity to analyze their clients' data. Eve said,

*I try not to have expectations. I like to do some homework before I actually walk into a school and get a little background on their data, on what their expectation is, what their goal is, what they've been doing to this point to reach their goal—a lot of background information on their teachers, their students, what professional development has taken place and so on, because that determines the approach that I take when I go to the school and the expectation that I have when I go to a school. I really kind of dig for that.*

Ann also depends upon data.

My opinion for the most part is not what I go into a school with. What I want is data. These are your assessments, or this is how much money we've given you; this is what your model provider prescribes that you utilize to get the results that you want. And I'm looking for evidence. So it's not about my opinion necessarily. Very little of my opinion is interjected. I have my opinions. Trust me. But I try to keep it all based on the evidence that I see.

She explained further that when schools have been engaged in improvement efforts for some time, she can measure their efficacy accurately. "I know for the most part what the implementation from the first year, the second year, the third year should look like. If they're not getting those results, I do form my opinion, but my discussion or dialogue in these schools is not based too much on my opinion."

I asked Ann if schools sometimes seem incapable of providing her with needed data. "Yes they do. Quite often that has happened." When that happens, she explained, a team of consultants goes onsite, determines what data is needed, and "puts together a process for getting at data about how the school systems are operating." That team then works with staff members, modeling data gathering and analysis procedures "step by step."

Ed recognized that it would be easy to become too trusting of his own experience and expertise.



I've got a lot of experience in schools so I try to watch the biases I have.

Typically I go to schools where there are problems. That's why people are asking me to come. So I try to limit the biases that I have. I try to go in with an open mind in the sense of being open to whatever data is open to me.

Since the consultants indicated their reliance upon data rather than preconceived opinions about client schools, it is interesting to note that they seldom complained about the quality or scarcity of data provided them by client schools. Yet, their determination to resist or delay forming opinions until they had seen school data revealed their dependency upon accurate data across the broad spectrum of client school conditions. Note, for example, Ed's comment above about being "open to whatever data is open to me." He sounds quite passive about accessing needed data. Sheryl told a story about working with a school for more than a year before she saw enough data to realize that her client was not making serious attempts to improve. She did, however, say that happened earlier in her consulting career when she still assumed that schools contacted her out of genuine interest in improvement. "They would be politically correct in the conversation," she explained. Now she attempts to generate clarifying data herself by becoming involved in clients' grant application process. Listening and watching as staff members gather data needed for applications informs her about clients very early in her partnerships with them. Two other study participants who work part time for their state's department of education have also found ways to circumvent data gaps. They said that they know how to

access data on client schools through the department and that their personal research supplements what schools provide them.

When Ann realizes that a school is relying too heavily on impressions or opinions, she does become proactive and, in so doing, models for teachers and administrators the practice of data-driven decision making. She asks, "What kind of data do you have to substantiate whether or not your students are improving?" She encourages schools to gather data beyond the state's standardized assessment and to do it at least quarterly. When she discovers that a client is incapable of presenting her with meaningful data, she become even more proactive. She told me that in such cases she goes on site with a team of consultant colleagues. "We put together a process for getting at data about how the school system is operating," again modeling data reliance for administrators and teachers. She explained that once data has been gathered and analyzed, she begins the improvement process with staff members. She emphasized, "But again based on hard data—not just on what we feel or what we think we saw even though we share that."

Yvonne also urges data gathering upon client teachers and administrators by showing them connections between their internal student data and researchers' findings. She described a district "pretty high on the socio-economic scale" that is not gathering data beyond that required by No Child Left Behind. "What we were really surprised and a little dismayed at was the lack of research and lack of data analysis that was going on in their building. They are really a case of just sitting on their laurels. Because this school uses an inclusion model,

Yvonne worries that if teachers aren't examining best practice research and applying it to inclusion classrooms, the gap between special education and regular students may widen. She predicts that as NCLB requires testing in more grades, this subgroup gap will rear up and catch this district unawares. "I think they're going to be in for a real shocker, because I think their special Ed subgroup is going to pull them way down. For the first time, they are not going to be making adequate yearly progress." Yvonne describes her reaction to learning that this staff was not applying new research to student data. "I was just really shocked. Neither the teachers nor the principals could tell us what sorts of research or studies they've looked at or read about or used when they made decisions about what kinds of practices are best to reach all children in the classrooms." Yvonne's response was to urge them to study not only student data, but also best practice research. She asked the staff, "How do you know what you're doing is the best thing to do? Are you sure you're using your grants to their best advantage if you're not looking at what the research says?"

Although it may seem that urging Yvonne's clients toward research would help them make *what* and *how* decisions, such research may also nudge them beyond practical matters. The process of studying how other schools have succeeded, especially those whose student populations mirror the client's, may raise teachers' expectations of student performance (Johnson, 2002). "They need to see data from schools that have defied the myth that low-income students cannot achieve at high levels. And they need to see the broad discrepancies between rhetoric and actual teaching practices at schools like their

own” (p. 11). Johnson sees heightened awareness as a precursor to “a momentum of dissatisfaction among colleagues that inspires commitment to change” (p. 11), which is exactly what Yvonne was hoping to accomplish.

As I listened to the consultants talk about issues related to local school student data and best practice research, I noted in their voice an apparent acceptance of status quo. Although they faithfully withheld opinions until they had seen whatever data was available, they also seemed to expect little data. They were prepared to gather facts about client schools on their own time through outside sources and to teach administrators and teachers how to fact find and analyze data. This seemed to be a normal and expected aspect of consulting.

#### Commendable Consultants Understand the Change Process

The final feature of commendable consultant essence revealed during interviews was their thorough understanding of organizational change process. When asked for his view of organization change, Ed began a logical, detailed answer,

Well, if I had to put a label on what I think, I would come close to Kotter’s (1996) work on change that there has to be a sense of urgency as a precondition to any change happening, that there has to be awareness on the part of stakeholders that something needs to be done. So I start with that as a basic premise that people are either unhappy or dissatisfied and don’t know what to do, but that there has to be some sense of urgency about the change process initially.

Noting that successful steps in change process are sequential and incremental, Ed referenced Kotter's (1996) multiple-step model of change. As Ed indicated, Kotter's steps begin with establishing a sense of urgency and then establishing a guiding coalition that develops and communicates to all members a vision of change and a strategy. Intensification of change momentum culminates in the fifth stage when employees are empowered to enact change. Then a new sequence begins as short-term gains are conquered first and later consolidated into more change. In the final stage, change behavior is embedded firmly into the organization's culture and, thus, becomes long-lasting.

When I commented to Ann that she seemed to emphasize getting clients to think for themselves rather than tell them what to do, she responded, "The main thing is the process of consultation—leading them to identify issues and challenges and then explore possibilities in regard to how they might resolve some of the issues." When she talked about organization change, she focused on Kotter's (1996) third and fourth steps where employees learn about the pending change and then begin to enact change. I was not surprised to hear Ann highlight this part of the change process, because from her first interview she positioned herself most comfortably in settings where she can "pull folks together" and get everyone involved. She believes that healthy change process incorporates conversations designed not only to alleviate frustration, but also to establish positive (rather than negative) change as reality.

Ed spoke at length about current research on balanced leadership, saying that persons "trying to effect change at a building level [need] to use the current

research on balanced leadership” (Waters, J.T., Marzano, R.J., and McNulty, B.A., 2003). Balanced leadership assigns two great tasks to school leaders: (1) recognize which best practices will most likely improve student achievement and (2) recognize the magnitude and necessary order of the required change and adopt leadership practices that will guide staff members through the change (p. 5). Continuing in his crisp, factual tone, Ed also differentiated between first and second order change, saying that “first order change is simply those changes that are incremental, that build on previous assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and students and can be easily incorporated into what a building does. A lot of quick fixes focus on that.” He contrasted first order with second order change, which he said is more difficult because it “requires either new skills, new training, or new insights into what the problem is all about. That is very uncomfortable for people, particularly people in buildings [rather than district level].” Nevertheless he concluded, “but it’s got to be the second order change that really impacts systems.”

### Conclusion

In most cases, my five study participants described their change agent attributes during their first interview with me. With the exception of Ann who was more reticent, they spoke freely, and collectively they created a varied list of characteristics which they deemed inherent in consultants. Although I would not suggest that their list is exhaustive, nevertheless, it is this cohort’s list and offers insight into their nature.

Revelation of these consultants' veneration for learning illuminates some of the behind-the-scenes mechanics that support working consultants. The consultants clearly stated in their interviews that they depended upon new knowledge and that they, in fact, were renewed by learning and by reflecting upon their practice. It seems for them only a small leap from appreciating learning for themselves to striving toward learning for students. The consultants' willingness to work continuously with adult educators can be better understood in the context of their steadfast desire to help kids. As I listened to the consultants speak of triumphs and trials, it seemed reassuring to learn that they fundamentally believe in teachers and principals. This belief clearly sustains them and, I believe, helps explain why persons familiar with their work labeled each one *commendable*. Appreciation for K-12 educators gives the consultants hope and helps maintain their belief that they can, through diligent work, help kids.

The consultants' determination to rely upon data rather than opinion (theirs or others) seems tied closely to their understanding of change process. Data gathering is part of process, and effective process depends upon accurate data analysis. Their willingness to roll up their sleeves and either gather data themselves or teach educators how to do it demonstrates their willingness to fully participate in their clients' change process. Immersion into all aspects of their clients' improvement initiatives lies at the very heart of commendable consultant essence.

As was seen in this and the previous chapter, participants' belief systems began developing during their classroom teaching days and evolved through their consulting experiences. The following chapter now explores those beliefs which surfaced during our interviews. In many cases, beliefs unfurled as respondents described interactions between themselves and clients.



## CHAPTER FIVE: COMMENDABLE CONSULTANTS' BELIEFS ABOUT SCHOOL-CONSULTANT PARTNERSHIPS

As the consultants whom I studied answered interview questions, their personally held beliefs about school-consultant partnerships continually rose to the surface. Although I never asked them explicitly to state their beliefs, the telling occurred naturally as they described their relationships with client schools.

### Concepts of Beliefs and Belief Systems are Examined in Literature

Social psychologists and philosophers define the concept of belief and describe belief systems as models of beliefs positioned relative to one another. Bem (1970) writes, "If a man perceives some relationship between two things or between some thing and a characteristic of it, he is said to hold a belief. Collectively, a man's beliefs compose his understanding of himself and his environment" (p. 4). Explaining that surface beliefs build upon deeper beliefs, Bem continues, "Every belief can be pushed back until it is seen to rest ultimately upon a basic belief in the credibility of one's own sensory experience or upon a basic belief in the credibility of some external authority" (p. 5). Each consultant interviewed appeared to trust that sensory experience to which Bem refers. When questioned about consultant-school partnerships, not once during any interview did one respond, "I don't know," or "I may be wrong." Of course, these five study participants knew they were invited to join my study because they had been labeled *commendable* or even *exemplary* by persons who knew their work.

Therefore, their invitation preconditioned them to speak as experts in their field, and they did not hesitate to draw upon their historical sensory experience and state their beliefs boldly.

“Beliefs are cognitive constructions about the linkages between categories,” write Sorrentino, Cohen, Olsen, and Zanna (2005, p. 40), explaining that beliefs encompass not only understandings of inert universal elements, but also comprehension of actors and action. “Beliefs about the world will additionally enable the social actor to make sense of the outcomes of her or his actions, the actions of others, and of impersonal events” (p. 41). By interpreting actions, people learn to structure outcome expectancies about actors’ behavior. “These expectancies are based upon assumptions about why and how the world operates” (p. 43). During their entire careers as teachers, administrators, and consultants, the people whom I interviewed observed and interpreted actions and formed beliefs about school personnel. It seems reasonable to assume that consultants’ beliefs about schools, developed over time through sensory experience, influence their expectations about new client schools. Even though the consultants said they withhold opinions about schools until they see data, their belief systems enabled them to speak at length about the kinds of schools in which they routinely work, that is, those generally identified as failing or not making adequate progress. Positioned during interviews as consultant experts, they spoke not as strangers to schools, but as guests intimately interactive with client personnel. Although focused on their beliefs about partner schools, my study participants also illuminated their beliefs about themselves as consultants.

For reporting purposes I have gathered into six categories interviewees' beliefs about their consultant selves as they were expressed to me; however, I do not suggest that six categories span the breadth of my participants' belief systems. Belief systems are complex, architectural-like arrangements featuring multiple beliefs positioned and sequenced relative to other beliefs—some central and others peripheral; some basic and others supplementary (Bem, 1970; Green, 1968; Rokeach, 1976). One person's belief system should not be viewed as a logical series of unwavering, tightly linked beliefs. Green observes that it is not uncommon for people to "hold strongly to certain beliefs which, if ever set side by side, would surely conflict" (p. 41). Moreover, beliefs held by people who seem to share belief systems may contrast.

We can, for example, believe something strongly or not, with passion or not, for good reason, or not. Two persons may hold the same belief system with a different measure of strength, with more or less adequate reasons, or on more or less adequate evidence. They may on the contrary, believe different things with equal strength, reason or evidence. (p. 38)

*It would be problematic to claim, therefore, that consultants hold such an entity as a single consistent belief.*

### Concepts of Self and Identity are Developed in Literature

*One of the consultants' beliefs reported in this chapter is that they are identifiably independent persons. Participants' references to their identity can be*

better understood by examining social psychology literature where self and identity are presented as complex ideas. Ratale and Duncan (2003) report—

Literature abounds with different definitions of self and identify....Some theorists highlight the spatial and temporal embeddedness of the self or identity...[describing] a *sense of a continuity of self* across time and space—the self is perceived as retaining its singularity in spite of changing external and internal factors and the interaction between them. (p. 151)

They explain further that other theorists, such as Rom Harré (1998) describe people's sense of themselves as awareness of a central location from which to find a point of view and perceive the world. Enconced in this viewing position, the observing person also acts. Additionally, "For many theorists, this sense of self extends to the collection of attributes, experiences, thoughts, motivations, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that one identifies as particular to oneself" (p. 152).

Owens (2003) asserts that the task of explaining self and identity is difficult and quotes James' (1890, p. 330) warning that "selfhood (including identity) is 'the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal'" (p. 206). Owens concludes that self is best defined as "an organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities, and motives" (p. 206). Although *self* can be interpreted as enclosed or contained, identity is established through relationships and, therefore, is interpreted as the aspect of self interactively situated in society. Owens draws upon Michener and DeLamater's (1999) definition of identity as "categories people use to specify who they are and to

locate themselves relative to other people” (p. 207). Burr (2002) explains that thinking about identity and society

as a dialectical process...allows us to think of the person as being both agentic (always actively constructing the social world) and constrained by society (to the extent that we must inevitably live our lives within the institutions and frameworks of meaning handed down to us by previous generations). (p. 147)

This explanation embodies the way that participants in my study describe themselves; that is, highly aware of the relational aspect of their work, knowing that they are both agentic and constrained as they attempt to fulfill their partnership roles.

This brief study of belief and identity literature provides a backdrop to the consultants’ voices as they reveal their beliefs about their consultant identities. In this chapter we first hear participants’ beliefs about their independent selves, that is, their sense of standing separate from clients’ problems, ready and able to sever partnerships when necessary. The next section considers consultants’ belief in themselves as it describes the trust they place in the experience they bring to partnerships. Then the chapter presents a dichotomy in participants’ beliefs. In spite of their independent confidence, consultants admit feeling out of control, somewhat powerless as partners for school improvement. Finally, the consultants address their response to client schools’ reform initiative failure.

Commendable Consultants Internalize Their Independent, Temporary Position

Among all the beliefs revealed by participants, most pronounced was their clear sense of themselves as non-permanent and independent partners with client schools. They were highly conscious of the temporary nature of their relationships with schools and equally aware of their professional independence from clients. "Everyone has multiple identities and being aware of this can be freeing and empowering" (Heilman, 2005). My interviewees did sound empowered as they described their capacity for coming and going—picking up and putting down their consultant identities. Eve said,

I don't belong to them basically. I'm there maybe two days out of a month, depending on their budget maybe a little more. Technically, a consultant means you go in on a temporary basis, and you're building the knowledge for the folks who really need to continue. I model their implementation and their knowledge, because I don't belong to their system and I want them to be able to support it after I leave.

Eve reported that she, in effect, tells school administrators, "Tomorrow I will be gone. You will still be in this school. This school will not run because Eve is there. This school will run because you're there—the same for teachers in the classroom."

Ann commented, "Many times I'm going into buildings where I have no relationship with the principal or the leadership team. It's pretty much strictly business." Ed's approach to his client schools was similar, although his reason seemed driven more by job description than philosophy.

I don't have a consistently stable relationship with them over time. I'm not a coach where I have to be in for a hundred days out of the year. I was contracted, for example, by the Department of Ed to do critical school audits. I was in the 24 worse schools in the state for up to a day doing that work. I do training for schools where I'm called in to do a particular training as opposed to being a coach that helps them over time, a hundred days at a time.

Ann and Ed reflect views expressed by Shein (1999), to whom they have both been exposed during training. One of Shein's principles is, "It is the client who owns the problem and the solution. It is not my job to take the client's problem onto my own shoulders....The reality is that only the client has to live with the consequences of the problem and the solution" (p. 20). Ed was not being flippant when he commented that at the end of the day he goes home and does not dwell in the consequences of the solution that he helped create.

In a commentary which Yvonne recorded, she turned to this matter of separation from client districts. She began by explaining that her husband, who "has watched as I've anguished over client issues, said I needed to say something into the tape player." Her husband wanted her to say two things. The first was, "You can't save the world. You can do the best you can, but you can't make people listen to you; nor can you make them follow your advice. You just have to hope that they will honor your advice and follow it." Yvonne continued, "The other thing is, you can't take it personally. If you're telling them and showing them the evidence of why they need to change things and they don't pay

attention to you, it's not your fault. You can't take it personally." Block (2000) suggests facetiously that if a consultant must take a client's reaction personally, "the rule is to do it after six o'clock in the evening—on your own time" (p. 169). He advises that a consultant might spend the whole night on it and involve friends, but not the client.

The temporary nature of consultant-client partnerships and, especially, the emotional separateness that consultants maintain are seldom discussed in consulting literature. Sheth and Sobel (2000), however, devote a chapter of their book to "Selfless independence: Balancing detachment and dedication" (p. 43-62). They write,

Great professionals maintain a delicate balance between dedication to their clients and detachment from them, exercising what we call *selfless independence*. It is a foundational attribute for anyone who aspires to become a trusted adviser to clients....With it, you are able to inspire both respect and loyalty from your clients. (p. 46)

Sheth and Sobel find three types of consultant independence: (1) intellectual independence, (2) emotional independence, and (3) financial independence. "Great advisers always find an appropriate way to say what they think..., develop levels of self-esteem and self-confidence that enable them to be independent of the good (or bad) opinions of others..., and cultivate a mindset of independent wealth" (p. 52), meaning they "do the right thing without regard to the monetary outcome" (p. 57). In an interesting meld, Sheth and Sobel link selflessness with independence and recommend that consultants enhance their own separateness



by increasing client independence. In their view, a selfless consultant is not a yes man to the client. Rather than clinging to a client and pleasing him at all costs, the freedom-conscious consultant evaluates clients objectively, asks tough questions, and gives unpopular answers when necessary. According to Sheth and Sobel, (p. 54-55) the fearless, independent minded consultant is free:

- to focus on the client's agenda and maintain genuine concern for his issues
- to share with or relinquish control to the client
- to ask the best questions as pointers to the answers the client needs to find
- to remain comfortably in the background when success is applauded
- to identify her own needs but separate them from the partnership

The participants' fondness for their independent status seemed to be linked closely to their view of themselves as self-sufficient experts. As they move from school to school they carry with them a reservoir of knowledge and skills. In the next section, they discuss those assets.

#### Commendable Consultants View Themselves as Self-Sufficient Experts

Yvonne voluntarily audio-taped her thoughts about being an independent, self-sufficient expert and mailed the tape to me. She had been reading *The One Thing You Need to Know* (Buckingham, 2005) and wanted to reflect upon how its message resonated with her. After explaining that Buckingham suggests that

successful leaders activate their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses and dislikes, Yvonne commented on tape,

The reason I bring this up is that in consulting, especially when you're in private consulting, you really have that option. You can say to yourself I know what my strengths are. I know what I'm good at. Am I good at presenting? Am I good at coaching? Am I good at analyzing? Am I good at planning? Whatever. And I can select my jobs and offer my services based on what I'm good at so that I have sustained success and feel satisfaction in what I'm doing.

So when I go into the school district, I can tell them, "Look, this is what I can offer you. This is my strength. This is what I'm good at, but if this doesn't fit your needs, that's okay. We can still be friends. You don't have to hire me." That's the beauty of being a private consultant. I can limit the jobs I take and what I do with my client districts based on an upfront discussion about what I offer.

In addition to her private consulting, Yvonne works half time for her state's department of education. In that capacity, opportunity for autonomous work is sharply diminished. She described the department's tendency to ask consultants to function as "generalists" fulfilling multiple roles, including those in which they have little skill. "It doesn't take into account personal strengths and weaknesses." Some of her colleagues are uncomfortable with duties forced upon them through their job description, duties that make them feel inept. She wishes her state's education department would align consulting duties with people's strengths. "I

think we'd serve our clients better." Yvonne, and also Ann, said that when consulting privately they don't hesitate to call in specialists when they run into client situations for which they are not experienced or trained. Yvonne commented, "And if it means that I work fewer days, so what. I helped facilitate getting the expert in there." She called this customizing her practice.

Eve, who works solely as an independent consultant and is never told by a boss what to do and be, depicts herself as a holder of multiple strengths. "A consultant actually is a doctor, a lawyer, a chief, a social worker, a psychologist, a knowledgeable professional." She added that since schools are complex organizations and even classrooms are complex, consultants must be able to juggle and perform every strength in order to "get people enthusiastic and motivated." At first glance, Eve's willingness to perform every strength seems to conflict with Yvonne's wish for alignment of duties with strengths. However, Eve equated strengths with approaches while Yvonne described specific tasks. Eve never said she would take on any task. In fact, she once commented that if asked to consult on student behavior issues, she would decline the invitation.

Eve and Yvonne, on the one hand, seemed to indicate that when they are consulting independently, ready availability of their skill arsenal is an asset. Even when a client's situation requires them to activate multiple skills, neither Yvonne nor Eve feel unsettled, especially since they are free to call in support as needed. Yet, when Yvonne's boss insists that she and other employees meet all the needs of every client, she believes client service is undermined. It seems that independence, that is, freedom to make appropriate matches between their

talents and clients' needs is important to these consultants. Although they feel strong in their array of knowledge and skills, ultimate strength lies in freedom to choose where and how to consult.

Lant (1982) also equates analytical independent thinking with quality consulting. "A good consultant will search for the solution that best suits the circumstances. Mental agility should take a quantum leap" (p. 8). He urges consultants to size up situations analytically and quickly and to search widely for solutions, but he does not suggest that consultants attempt to own every strength or single-handedly uncover every solution.

Sheryl's discussion of her consulting strengths was in the context of similar cool-headed self-analysis. She works hard to minimize her natural tendency to direct like a general since she knows that some clients find that too aggressive. She often agrees to be on site in clients' schools as many as 24-30 days each year. In her capacity as model provider director, she also shows up to support team members who are conducting training sessions, and she often just drops by if she is traveling through a district's area. Consequently, a client staff may see her many times each year. She knows that if she continually acts overly directive, teachers and administrators may become offended. Therefore, she has deliberately cultivated a reflective questioning manner which she draws upon frequently to balance her more in-charge-like moments. She considers neither her directive nor her collaborative moments to be superior to the other, but she has taught herself to discern clients' needs and to put her most appropriate self forward. As with Eve and Yvonne, Sheryl seemed to value the ability to identify

her own strengths and activate them appropriately, an opportunity afforded the independent consultant.

Although all of the participants in my study were notably confident and aware of their consulting strengths, none was more so than Ed. As I explained in his introduction, early in Ed's consulting career he attended two comprehensive trainings during which his strengths were identified by others and explained to him. He has a notebook in his home, given to him when he completed training that describes his strengths in detail. Unlike Yvonne and Ann who work part time for a department of education, Ed is always free to accept or reject requests for his services. He has a clear understanding of his strengths, and he has freedom to work only where they can be showcased. His career seems to be spiraling upward. As Ed says, "The phone always rings."

Buckingham (2005) analyzes the effects of recognizing individual strengths, not in the sense of making the operator more comfortable, but in making her more effective. Although he writes in the context of a manager finding strength in individual employees, outcomes described by Buckingham seem to manifest themselves in the consultants I studied who, as part- or full-time self-employed persons, do in one sense employ themselves. "Finding and capitalizing on each person's uniqueness makes each person more accountable" (p. 95). Buckingham explained that once a person takes full ownership of his strengths he becomes accountable to himself for unleashing those strengths upon others' needs. He adds that although it may seem counterintuitive, individual strength ownership actually builds team sensibility. "By identifying, emphasizing, and

celebrating each person's uniqueness you...accelerate these feelings. You make people need one another" (p. 95). Those who aggressively explore their strengths also discover their weaknesses and, therefore, approach team work with a belief system that might be named *I both need and provide—I both receive and give*. The resultant interchange among such team members is powerful. If it is true as Buckingham asserts that strength acknowledgement translates into responsible strength application, it seems reasonable to suggest that my consultants' self-awareness of strength heightens their capacity for contribution to school improvement teamwork.

As we have seen in the previous sections, my study participants view themselves as self-sufficient, independent partners for school improvement who embody rich knowledge and multiple skills. They seem disinclined toward structuralism's view that "reduces the notion of individual significance and autonomy by portraying the self largely as a construct and consequence of impersonal systems" (Heilman, 2005). There is, after all, no single professional code, no consultant institution setting norms for consulting behavior. Instead, as I replay their interview tapes and hear the intensity with which they often spoke, it seems that these consultants were highly conscious of their relational self, "the self that engages in immediate human interchange. Related to this idea is the performed self or the enacted self which always exists in a dynamic present, right now" (p. 137). My interviewees treasure their free will, their ability to apply self-contained knowledge and experience to clients' immediate situations and their opportunity to perform aptly in ever-changing present moments. In the next

section, they explain how self-confidence translates into bold action when necessary.

## Consultants Repeat Unpopular Messages and Sever

### Partnerships When Necessary

There are times when educational consultants must deliver to a client an unpopular analysis of school conditions. Yvonne's audiotape of this challenge reveals her dogged determination to get the truth as she sees it on the table even when doing so forces her to stand alone amidst non-receptive client staff.

I was reminded today of an old Chinese proverb that made me think about what it's like to be a consultant at times. "Just because you think no one is listening doesn't mean you shouldn't send the message." Now I know I'm not saying it quite right, but when you know what's right and you know what the research says, and you know what the data is showing you, you find that you have to keep repeating it and repeating it and repeating it and showing it and pointing to it whether or not people are listening, because that's what's going to make a change. We all know how change is very scary to people. But I keep telling myself you gotta stick to the facts. You gotta point to the data—point to the research that fits the situation, because they're not getting it and they can't argue with you if it's the facts. They can't argue with you if it's research. You have to just keep using it and hope that eventually it will sink in. Just because you don't think they're listening doesn't mean you shouldn't send the message.

One day Yvonne returned home after teaming with colleagues on a two day “intense interview examination of a building.” During a break some colleagues commented that two schools they serve had been visited by an independent diagnostic team that had promised to “do an intense and direct analysis and make some very strong and very pointed recommendations, no holds barred.” Instead their final report, witnessed by Yvonne’s colleagues, was disappointing because it was “lukewarm and somewhat innocuous sort of reporting out that was broad and kind of vague and extremely diplomatic.” Yvonne’s colleagues concluded that external consultants may not always be as direct or honest as they should because they hope to be hired by the district eventually as change agents. As Yvonne drove home, she began thinking about a “tiny failing district” where she made a diagnostic report. “My team was extremely direct. We did not hold back any punches, because everyone in the district was responsible for the failures. They had all the resources. They had all the supplies,” she continued. “They had everything they needed, but for eight consecutive years they just flat out ignored their terrible test results.” Yvonne said that she and her team were “brutal” with them. “But,” she exclaimed, “guess who they approached when they wanted someone hired to come in and work with them to start getting things changed. They hired me, and I was their biggest critic!” Yvonne concluded her story by commenting that different styles of consulting and different ways to tell the hard facts can prove successful. There is not “one style [in] the way to approach consulting.”



Later, during an interview, Yvonne's determination to share truth as she saw it was still firm, but her frustration was more evident.

I find it interesting that they never ask me what I think. Because I don't think they want to hear it. That's where I've told you my frustration is—people not wanting the truth or to be held accountable or to take responsibility. I just don't see it happening and that's probably why these districts or schools are in the state they're in. You know what? It really comes down to courage. I see it as courage. Do they have the courage to face the truth, and do they have the courage to do something about it? I see that lacking very often.

"The consultant who objectively concludes that he or she cannot help the client system should, of course, withdraw and if possible, refer the client to some other source of professional help. This act also requires maturity" (Lippitt, 1978, p. 103). All of the consultants except Ed indicated their willingness to sever partnerships if client schools refuse to attend to their recommendations, especially when the suggestions are supported by data. (Ed did not say he wouldn't. He just never brought severance into a question response.) Ann noted that when functioning as a half-time department of education consultant, she is not allowed to sever consulting relationships, but that as a private consultant, she might suggest such a school look elsewhere for consultation. She explained that she would be most likely to do that if a new administrator with a different agenda "that's going to be counter-productive" arrived. She might "suggest they look elsewhere for someone to support them on that." I asked if that was due to her

desire to protect her reputation as a successful consultant, and she quickly depersonalized the matter.

No, I'm not so concerned with my reputation at this juncture. What I'm trying to get at is that I've worked with districts in the past to help them put together a professional development plan that would lead to very specific results that data indicated were necessary for the school to improve student achievement or to change climate. And when someone else comes in and that entire plan is abandoned without discussion from a leadership team or no rationale is given for why we now need to go in a new direction, at that point I might consider saying to a school that they might—I could even make a recommendation of someone else who might be able to help with that. It just seems that you've expended a lot of energy to get them to that point and now we're backing up and starting all over again.

As Ann continued discussing this issue, she returned to a theme that ran through much of her interviewing—absolute insistence upon data driven decisions made through staff collaboration.

I strongly believe that schools need to be data driven and they need to be collaborative. And when I don't see movement in that direction and we have a conversation and there's just no opportunity for input from the staff, I might consider recommending that someone else support them. That may be something...it would depend on any given situation.

Ann's cautious conclusion left me wondering whether in practice she hesitated to actually sever partnerships or whether she, for some reason, did not want to sound negative or harsh during our interview.

Unlike Ann, Sheryl indicated that she would not hesitate to sever a partnership if it seemed necessary. For example, she expects that client schools will make time for her to work with staff.

If they are not accommodating in that regard, then we say to them, "You've got a choice to make. We're not going to have an impact if we don't have an opportunity to work with people. You provide us an opportunity to work with them, or we're out of here, and you can send your grant money back to the department of Ed." So you have to be clear as to what the expectations are. They can't have an expectation that the consultant is going to have an impact by waving a magic wand. That's not how it works. It's takes hard work. It takes time.

Sheryl told about a district in which she and her consulting team are working where "people at the top have conflicting perspectives as to what they want." Although people at the building level are pleased with Sheryl's team's work, a few district leaders seem to want to exercise controlling power. Sheryl said that if it appears that her consultant group cannot satisfy all persons involved, they "will just gracefully say we wish you well, and that will be it. Take the high road and realize that there are some political maneuverings going on that we have no control over." When I questioned Sheryl about financial loss resulting from a severed partnership, she responded, "I think you have to look at

the long term.” She asked rhetorically whether a consultant can afford to continue in a relationship with a school that might claim to be adhering to the consultant’s recommended program when it is, in fact, not. She concluded, “I don’t think you can.”

Yvonne concurred. “There’s that Kenny Rogers song. *You have to know when to hold them and know when to fold them* (Schlitz, 1976). There’s a point where you have to say—this is all I can do and I can’t do any more.”

Eve also linked her severance experience to personal ethics. She wants to feel that her clients are spending their money well when they retain her services.

There comes a point in time if you’re not seeing any implementation being put into practice after you’ve sat and really worked and planned and talked and visited—if there’s no implementation going on, then I usually ask for a sit-down with all parties involved, because I’m expensive. I don’t like taking people’s money when they’re not using it well, because ethically for me it’s not a comfortable place. If you’re spending \$1,000 or \$1,200 a day for my services and I walk out the door and you say, “Oh, thank God she’s gone. Now we can go back to doing the same old, same old,” I’m not going to take your money. It’s not satisfying and it’s cheating the kids. If you think you’re better off buying a textbook and following a teacher’s guide, then spend it that way.

The bottom line is there needs to be some small glimmer of results (chuckle) after several of my visits. In the beginning everyone is learning, but after that there need to be some baby steps toward why I was hired. I

would have to say if you wish for me to continue, these are my expectations. So there does come a time when I will have to have some frank conversations. Generally if it doesn't work out, if I think it's totally against the grain, then I will usually say your money is valuable, and you really need to be spending it in a way that you feel is important to you, and I'm thinking that I'm probably not the person for you. And then I'll tell them why I think I'm not the person for them and what work I feel really needs to be done. I don't play along if I really feel that people are way off base or if they just aren't ready to tackle the hard work.

Eve concluded this part of her interview with the caveat that she rarely "steps out" mid school year and would be more likely to complete the year without recommending that she return for the following year. "Probably under the most extreme circumstances I would step out, but it's not my style to do that."

Cockman, Evans, and Reynolds (1996) agree that severance might be necessary at any time, but insist that, "ideally disengagement should be a gradual process rather than an abrupt end" (p. 174). They believe that the best safeguard against an untimely and unfortunate termination is adequate preparation. "The only way you can ensure [gradual separation] is by raising the issue early in the relationship and then designing your intervention with disengagement in mind" (p. 174). Clear understanding and agreement on goals, timelines, roles, and assessments help safeguard the relationship. Cockman et al. suggest that consultants not postpone the decision to terminate if they begin the consulting process only to find barriers being erected by client personnel. "If

you find you are unable to gain entry, it could make sense to disengage from the assignment without going any further" (p. 175).

Schein (1999) suggests that both parties in a school-consultant partnership recognize that severance is a possibility and that there is a positive side to termination. "Mutual freedom to terminate is important to ensure that the basis of the relationship is the actual value obtained, not the fulfillment of some obligation" (p. 237). Rather than promising a continuing relationship, Schein is more interested in giving to his client and receiving from his client a good faith effort.

When Yvonne described difficult partnerships in which client personnel attempt to abandon agreed upon goals, I asked if she then referred clients back to documents on which mutual goals had been recorded. She responded emphatically, "You betcha! You betcha! I often have to pull that document out for the principal, and I often have to even pull it out for the teachers and say this is what I was hired to do. I was not hired to do thus and so.

Yvonne then related the following story.

*I had to do that once with a superintendent who started at a meeting with a lot of other people arguing with me and telling me, "You're wrong. You don't understand." And I finally said, [speaking forcefully] "Wait a minute. You hired me. It's right there on my job description to advise you and give you my recommendations based on my expertise and experience. I've been an educator for thirty plus years. I do know what I'm talking about. You hired me to give you my opinion. I am giving you my opinion.*

Disregard my advice and opinion if you wish, but do not tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about. Let me assure you if that had continued, she would have had my resignation on her desk real quick. No, no, no lady, don't do this to me. And you certainly don't do this to me in front of other people.

As my study's participants spoke about severance from partnerships, it seemed clear to me that they would much rather establish a healthy partnership and see it through to a successful end. Although each respondent brought the topic into their interviews voluntarily, it seemed to give them no satisfaction. They were much more inclined to focus on productive relationships with clients.

In this chapter so far, I've reported that my study participants held confidence in their knowledge and skills, in their ability to maintain independence within partnerships, and in their capacity for bold decision making. In this next section, they position their confidence in past experience and knowledge.

### **Commendable Consultants Trust Their Experience and Knowledge**

*Because consultants interact steadily with new people in new schools, they frequently encounter the unexpected. In such moments, commendable consultants turn inward, trusting knowledge gained through experience. Sheryl described her calmness under pressure.*

*Just like in a classroom, just like a building administrator—you have to have a high level of acuity about the responses that you're getting, where people are that day. You could be coming in and dealing with a ten-year*

old that had a heart attack on the track. Your role has to do with how do I help them deal with this particular situation. You might be there for lockdowns. There are just all kinds of stuff that goes on. So you have to know when to apply pressure, when to bring in other resources that you know of. I have found it to be an advantage that I am as mature as I am, that I've had the experience that I've had, because I have a repertoire of responses to draw on.

Like Sheryl, Ed also noted his ability to structure his consulting to fit client needs, saying that he does not rely on a single "specific training implementation and systematic implementation." As an example, he said that after many years of experience he had a plethora of opening activities that could be quickly adopted to an unexpected situation. "I've got maybe fifteen or twenty of them in my back pocket."

In an audiotape, Yvonne expressed the value she places upon experience which helps her sort truth from fiction.

This morning I want to talk about experience. As a consultant, it's really important that you have some experience because people do try to flim-flam you. The old saying that actions speak louder than words is extremely important in a consultant's business. People are very glib.

District administrators are slinging the stuff around to get what they want or to take money from the state for example or the government, and they write up a grant but then do something else with it and think that no one will ever figure it out. This has happened a lot in my work as a consultant



for the state and I've uncovered a lot of flim-flamming as a private consultant.

One thing helps you identify it right away, and you know most of the time when you're being flim-flammed—I don't know what else to call it. When they're trying to pull the wool over your eyes or telling you this, that and the other thing, you don't see one bit of evidence of it because you know what it looks like when it is in place and if it's being done properly. I was very fortunate to have a wide range of experiences [before consulting], so I feel pretty confident that I know what I'm talking about and know whether I'm seeing flimflamming or not.

Ed trusts his experience because he sees that others draw confidence from it and that it opens doors.

It's helpful that in this state I've been around. When I was in one school district, I had a superintendent that really encouraged the junior administrators to be involved in statewide activity. So I was on administrative statewide advisory groups and task forces. I've worked with intermediate school districts. I've worked with universities around the state, so I know a lot of people and people know me. Having that reputation is a big plus.

In fact, I walked into one large urban school and the principal didn't know we were coming. The communication had broken down in the bureaucracy of the district, but he knew who I was. He'd been to one of my trainings that I ran for three months through his district, so he knew me

right away, "Oh hey, come on in. I didn't realize you were the auditor coming in." He made it very easy for me to do my work.

Similarly, Eve trusts her past experience to propel her into partnerships where clients believe in her reputation and, therefore, receive her positively.

Generally people contact me because they're familiar with the system I worked in [before consulting] and the leadership and literacy knowledge I can offer. So I come into it with them having an idea of why bother hiring her to begin with. So after many conversations and after listening a lot and talking a lot and trying to understand where they're coming from and them understanding where I'm coming from, they generally never have a problem with my integrity. They truly understand that I definitely believe in what I do and I feel they can accomplish this and achieve it. So I don't think they ever question my intentions. It's not an integrity question. I truly believe they know I'm there because I believe in what I do.

For Eve, experience was not only a matter of valuing lessons learned and reputation developed in the past. She said that today's experience also prepares the way for the future. When teachers thank her profusely because they are not so isolated and they now enjoy their school culture, when student achievement scores are rising, when her initial persuasion is moving under its own momentum and "the next year's plan looks a lot different from the first year's plan," then Eve knows that present experience will once again emerge to benefit future client partnerships.

A few years before this research began, I heard Eve speak to an audience of educators invited to their state capital to learn about a new resource for school improvement. The Department of Education official who introduced Eve was clearly enthusiastic about the expertise she would bring to his state as a visiting consultant, but he wisely shortened his introduction and gave her the stage. As Eve began to speak, her demeanor provided the best backdrop to her message. Although she presented herself unpretentiously, she exuded confidence. She spoke without fanfare, quietly yet forcefully. Her manner seemed to say to us, "I know what I've accomplished. I bring experience and expertise. I can help you."

When Eve concluded, the state official said she would meet anyone who wished to talk further at a nearby table. I eagerly made my way to the table where about ten people sat down with Eve. For an hour she patiently answered our questions, telling of her experiences and explaining her beliefs about school improvement. When the hour concluded and we stood to leave, I knew that I had heard from a consultant who deeply trusted her skill and experience and who stood poised to advance school reform.

Yvonne also values her experience. She knows that it lends credence to her consultations. Clients assume that her experience infuses her with understanding of their plight.

Many times they tell me that the fact that I was an educator for many years and an administrator—they know that I know what they're going through and I'm sympathetic about it. I understand. That certainly doesn't let them off the hook if they're doing things wrong, but they seem to

appreciate the fact that I've walked their walk. I've been in their shoes and understand what they're up against.

Lippitt (1978) suggests that rather than focusing on a specialty, persons intending to consult might begin with a broad education and then enhance it with a self-designed reading program and varied experience. According to Lippitt, university training ideally is multi-disciplinary since course work can serve as basic training for understandings that will become valuable to the consultant. "The whole purpose of the mixed inter-discipline approach is to give breadth and scope to the practitioner....Broad knowledge and multiple skills are needed" (p. 105). All of my participants' bachelor and master's degrees and specialist certifications were taken in education, and each one's pre-consulting experience combined teaching and administration. When I asked the commendable consultants what they did during free time, all described a multifarious reading routine.

Although none of my interviewees expressed the view that their clients should show greater appreciation for their experience and knowledge, Davey (1971), who gathered data from 91 organizations while researching consultant efficacy, concluded that "an organization should regard a consultant as an expert resource, and a collaborating equal" (p. 153). He believes that client respect for consultant's expertise paves the way for consultant input into client decisions and, therefore, increases consultant efficacy. He says, in fact, that an organization staff's "reason(s) for enlisting consultant help" (p. 26) may derive from their perception that the consultant possesses specialized experience and

knowledge superior to their own, including superior ability to provide new ideas and unbiased opinions, diagnose problems, evaluate solutions, and train organization members. He also suggests that respected consultants may be able to gain information not accessible to organization leaders and that valued outside consultants are more likely to be allowed to function inside while organization members are tied to their normal tasks.

Dawson (2000) feels so strongly about consultant knowledge factor that he devoted an entire book, *Developing Knowledge-based Client Relationships* to this topic. He suggests that consultant knowledge actually transforms into a client's asset. Through the flow of knowledge from the consultant to the client, the client adds value to his knowledge base and to his decision making ability. "Useful knowledge results in better decisions; this is where the true value of knowledge resides. Action and implementation must follow decisions if they are to have value. Effective implementation, however, is itself a sequence of decisions and actions based on knowledge" (p. 80).

The consultants I interviewed valued the knowledge they gained through experience, because it enhanced client confidence as well as self-confidence in their ability to cope with client situations. Confidence flowing from both sides of the partnership smoothes the way for freely flowing interchanges and helps to establish a comfortable atmosphere for problem analysis and solution implementation. However, no interviewee implied that assets and confidence could assure a thoroughly positive school-consultant partnership. The next

section reports on a darker side of consulting, a reality that respondents implied must be faced by all consultants—inability to control outcome.

### Commendable Consultants Acknowledge Their Lack of Power

Although the consultants I interviewed firmly believed in their substantive experience and skill, and although they clearly viewed themselves as independent, self-sufficient experts, they also acknowledged their lack of power and their inability to control outcomes in client schools. Eve said, “One of the things that you have to learn as you consult—you have no evaluative power over these people.” She contrasted this with being in a staff administrative position where pressure can be applied through the evaluation process, and “there comes a point in time when you say this is my expectation of you—kind of like take it or lump it.” A consultant’s relationship with client staff is different. “When you’re a consultant you can’t say that. You can only hope that there is an environment for really wanting to continue. You really have no evaluative power or the ability to hold anyone else accountable.”

Yvonne said that one of the perks associated with working part time as a state level department of education consultant is that when meeting with her as a representative of the state, clients’ interest in proving intention and progress is a little more pronounced than when she consults privately. However, she also admitted that settling an aura of authority upon herself is difficult. “I’m just amazed. What are they thinking? What I’m finding is that they hire you, but they don’t really want to hear what you have to say, or they don’t want to follow your

recommendations.” She said that all she can do is gather facts and present to the superintendent. She asked herself rhetorically whether it is “ethical and proper” to go over the superintendent’s head and contact board members, and she answered, “I say, no.” She does not go over the level of the administrator with whom she is working directly unless she is specifically asked to do so. An interesting side-note to her discussion of protocol is that when she is asked to present to boards, they seldom request her opinion. She presents the facts and that’s the end of it. In another interview she again expressed a pragmatic attitude toward her lack of power.

You’re in there as a consultant. It doesn’t mean that you’re an employee. It doesn’t mean that you have any authority invested in you by the board to hire, fire, make decisions, implement. I mean you’re there most of the time coaching, recommending, helping them set up processes or procedures, showing them how to get their data, trying little by little to lead them, convince them to do things like looking at data and assessing children periodically for how they’re doing and then doing something about it. Look for people who are the most qualified to teach the kids. I mean you do the best you can. You do what you know is right. Whether they take your advice or not is all based on their beliefs, whether they want to do anything to be part of the change.

When Sheryl told about a school where she may soon have to discontinue her services, she ameliorated her feeling of powerlessness by focusing on the positive effect that she and her team have managed to impart to the district.

Although her allotted time may be shortened, she says she can “be glad we had a positive impact on classroom teachers and building learning communities that may be sustained over the course of time.” The moment of partnership severance, whether through unfortunate or planned circumstances, can generate feelings of powerlessness for consultants. Sheryl’s hope that improvement momentum will be sustained and compounded by one or more staff persons after her departure seems prevalent among the consultants.

The matter of power, or rather lack of power, seemed to throw Yvonne into an identification quandary. Watching her power ebb and flow made her question the words people use to label her. “The term *consultant*—I don’t know if it’s always the right term for the kind of work that I have to do.” When she has to audit schools’ funding compliance, she doesn’t feel like a consultant. Some clients call her a turn around specialist, and she insisted emphatically that she doesn’t like the sound of it.

“The idea behind turn around specialist started off to mean someone who had a little more directive authority, coming in as an expert and telling people here’s what you need to do like [a] diagnostician and prescriber. [It] has this connotation of being more directive, punitive.

I don’t see myself—you know I’m a—I have enough experience to be rooted in reality, and I know when you go into places they’ll go along with you if what you’re telling them to do—if you go in under that turn around specialist and you tell them this is what is wrong and this is what you need to do, they might all go “yeah, yeah” when you tell them this is what’s



wrong if it agrees with what they think is wrong. Then you start telling them what to do. And if it's something they don't want to do, even though you have expertise and they hired you to tell them what to do they aren't going to do it. So when people—you know when I introduce myself when I'm in the district—even though they still use that terminology *turn-around specialist*, I prefer to call myself a restructuring consultant. I am hired to consult the district on their restructuring, because really I have no authority in the job description.

The board expects me to veto things if principals are going in the wrong direction. Forget it. [hands lifted in a dismissive gesture] That could lead to a really terrible relationship between me and the people that I most have to influence. So I rather think of a consultant more as an influencer, a convincer—giving them the facts and just not letting them get away from those facts. Putting the facts out in front of them and leading them as much as I can. I think consulting is a little more assertive than being a coach, because I'm not going to wait for them to figure out what's going wrong. If they knew what was going wrong they wouldn't be in the state they are in. They wouldn't have these terrible achievement results and a mismanaged program.

The multifaceted beliefs held by this study's participants and reported in the above sections—belief in separate status and self-contained expertise for consultants, severance when necessary, reliance on experience, and admitted powerlessness all meld into a fact that even commendable consultants have to

occasionally face. Improvement initiatives that they support do sometimes fail. In the final section of this chapter, consultants discuss their response to failure.

#### Commendable Consultants Identify Their Response to Initiative Failure

Harrison (1995) urges consultants to strive to learn from failed projects. "It is my experience that I and others learn more from difficulties than from successes if we can bring ourselves to face the difficulties squarely and honestly" (p. 56). Because he firmly decided to learn from failure, he now looks back on failed projects "with affection and gratitude" (p. 56). All of the interviewed consultants had seen client schools fall short of improvement goals and when asked, all could describe their personal response to hearing that an initiative they had supported had gone flat or was no longer active. They did not, however, appear to view such episodes with Harrison's affection and gratitude. Ed most definitely separated himself from client failure.

I really take to heart the notion that I don't own the problem. It's not my problem. I don't go away feeling that sad or sorry for them because I don't live there with them. I get to go home. I really understand that as a consultant, at the end of the day I go home.

He did, however, temper his remarks with a caveat, saying that he does "feel a tremendous responsibility" to help them "achieve greater levels of understanding of what the issues really are." Doing so makes him feel that he has done the best he can do. He indicated that his sense of responsibility stems partly from his comparison of their lot to his. "I get paid and I get paid pretty good. I don't treat

the relationship lightly because I have the better part of it. These people have to live in that context and therefore I try to do the best I can to help.”

When asked how she responds personally to initiative letdown, Ann adopted a logical tone. “Number one is the reason.” She said she focuses on gathering information. She tries to find out if lack of funding or change of leadership was the culprit. If the initiative was supported by a model provider, she investigates the provider’s culpability. She seeks out those on the school staff whom she considers responsible for implementation and asks what happened. She wants to know whether weakness occurred in the original training stage or whether local staff did not have capacity for sustained implementation in the post-training stage.

When Sheryl pondered the matter of initiative failure, her thoughts turned immediately to process, but she included herself in that process.

I first think about people and relationships and what changes may have occurred to stall or derail an improvement effort that I was a part of.

Almost all of our success stories can be attributed to a few key people at a school really getting it and remaining as stewards of the work. What I’ve thought about is how to impact more people sooner in the change process so that early success can be visible and attributed to the practices and structures that we espouse in our change mode. The more wide-spread the practice, the increased chance of sustainability.

Sheryl continued, saying that since one unhappy experience where she worked with a school for two years before discerning that they were not committed to

change, she has learned to hold people accountable early on and to question people's "beliefs and assumptions about their responsibility for teaching all children versus laying blame elsewhere." If she sees "little or no follow through," she calls people on it. For Sheryl, past failure seemed to serve as a lesson well learned, a lesson she did not intend to passively experience again.

Yvonne's response to my request that she describe her reaction to initiative slow down or stoppage was a mixture of logic and emotion. She first said that she would be sad and would "probably grieve a little bit" simply because she works "awfully hard" at anything she gets involved in and because she prides herself on taking things to completion. As an example, she said that she has no unfinished knitting projects sitting at home. "Even if I hate the thing I'm working on, it will get done." But she added that she would also try to think objectively about why the initiative went flat.

Was it because there was no longer money to support it? Was it because people were switched around? I'd be doing an awful lot of reflecting, probably trying to decide was there anything I did wrong? Or was it external forces that wouldn't allow it to continue? Many times that's what happens.

When I asked Eve what thought process she goes through when she hears that an initiative has gone flat or is not longer active, she responded with strong emotion. "It's hard. It's hard for me." She then told about one particular school for which she had once held high hopes. A recent email from a colleague had confirmed her fear that her earlier work was slipping away.

It hurts. It hurts because I saw so much promise and really started getting some good things going there. I think we were past the point of resistance and into openness. So it really hurts, because I just feel it's hurting the kids. That's what I really feel. They pay me whether they listen to what I say or not or whether they implement what I provided or not. My salary comes in. They hired me; they contracted. I go there; I get paid. But I don't feel that way about the work. I feel that I'm providing an opportunity for them to open minds of kids in a different way and that they're tramping on that opportunity. So it does personally bother me.

### Situating Consultants' Beliefs in the World of Education

When external school improvement consultants such as the five whom I studied are about their work, they are generally on-site in school buildings; yet, they are attached to neither district nor community. Most of their work is accomplished through direct face-to-face interaction with teachers and administrators; yet, they join no school staff. While traditional educators situate themselves in one district, one building, with one student population, consultants maneuver multiple schools through a broad school reform movement. If teachers and principals crew the ship, then external consultants captain the tugboats that push and pull them through changing waters.

Although many education consultants were originally teachers and/or administrators, it is unwise to assume exact matches between beliefs held by school personnel and consultants. One of the most obvious contrasts resides in

their attitudes toward change. This is not to suggest that school personnel unequivocally resist change while consultants promote it. Some teachers and principals avow their pursuit of change, saying they constantly strive for forward momentum in student learning through refined pedagogy. Nevertheless, for traditional educators, change is just that. It denotes something new and different and, therefore, something gained and lost. For consultants, on the other hand, change is the norm. In fact, in the case of consultants like I studied who work largely with failing schools, great change is the goal. Whereas, successful reform initiatives at first feel foreign to school personnel, status quo feels strange to consultants. A consultant who completes a school partnership with no sense of change having occurred feels that something unexpected and perplexing has occurred.

School-consultant partners harbor not only differing attitudes toward change, but also different values of change. Teachers and administrators often view change as a necessary component of their life work fueled by community stakeholders who expect their schools to keep abreast of new ideas and to maintain an aura of readiness for emerging societal demands upon their children. In contrast, for consultants, change is something they do; it's not a component of a job description. Change is what they are. It's their very life flow.

Although external school improvement consultants work almost exclusively with teachers and administrators, they are neither. (It should be noted that I speak of consultants whose specialty is school-wide, systemic reform rather than content specialists who do enter classrooms and model best teaching

practices.) The consultants whom I studied and whose field is largely absent from literature will be seen in Chapter 6 to view themselves as facilitators, coaches, and above all else helpers. Their position is clearly distinguishable from classroom teachers and especially from building administrators. As will be seen in Chapter 5 when we examine my participants' views of principals, consultants disassociate themselves from daily matters of school operation. Yes, consultants' attention does frequently turn to teaching or administrative details. For example, one of my participants commented that she experiences success if come year's end she knows that next year's lesson plans will be written differently, and another one spoke of wanting to see changes in the way a principal creates a meeting agenda. Consultants are cognizant of the details. But it's all about whether those details can be realigned to streamline the school's movement through change.

Because consultants enter into school partnerships for the sole purpose of moving schools from where they are to where they need to go, their interest lies less in what is than what might be. Their justification for taking schools' money, their perceived contribution to students, along with answers to their deepest "I am..." ponderings collectively forge a set of beliefs unique to consultants. These beliefs stand entirely upon faith in change.

Were educational consulting literature more plentiful, consultant beliefs might be distinguished by comparing approaches through which literature explains school staff's and school consultants' beliefs. However, little research has been conducted into education consultants' values or motives or vision. The

majority of literature examining consulting in practice situates consultants in the corporate world or sometimes in the more generic arena of organization change (Davey, 1071; Lippitt, 1978; Cockman, Evans, and Reynolds, 1996). A large body of “how to” literature offering advice for successful consulting is also directed toward effecting general organizational or corporate improvement (Bermont, 1997; Block, 1985; Holtz and Zahn, 2004; Stryker, 1984). Library searches for literature under keywords “school consultant” or “educational consultant” generally locate works about classroom management, special education, school counseling, or higher education rather than K-12 school reform consulting.

Educational consulting is under researched and under theorized. The existing research gap merits attention, especially given the call for more partnerships in today’s era of accountability. The possibility of promoting stronger consultant-school partnerships by better understanding consultants’ belief-systems warrants further study.

### Conclusion

This chapter has reported commendable consultants’ beliefs about partnerships with client schools. The participants voiced their individuality and their separateness from clients. They also recognized their powerlessness and admitted that they hold no control over initiative implementation, no ability to guarantee sustainability. Their response to initiative failure varied from self-protective distancing to internalized hurt. Throughout this chapter, the



consultants revealed emotional ties to client relationships, appreciation for school staffs, and commitment to their craft.

The consultants who participated in this study also analyzed their opportunity to affect long lasting school improvement by naming factors of school life that impact their work. In the next chapter, responses turn outward to client schools as they discuss factors that color school cultures and frame staff attitudes and behavior.

**A STUDY OF COMMENDABLE SCHOOL REFORM CONSULTANTS**

**VOLUME II**

**By**

**Ilene Mae Satchell**

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## CHAPTER SIX: SCHOOLING FACTORS THAT IMPACT CONSULTANTS' OPPORTUNITY TO EFFECT LONG-LASTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Each of the five consultants who participated in my study was interviewed four times. During the second interview round, I directed their attention toward schools in which they consult. I wanted to view those schools as consultants see them; that is, as the other half of consultant-school partnerships. Through this particular lens, I hoped to examine the environment in which consultants work and, thus, better understand school elements that aid and hinder consultant efficacy. My opening question to all five interviewees was, "What factors of school life most affect your ability to initiate lasting change?" This chapter gathers their responses into three categories: (1) leadership, (2) beliefs, and (3) communities, detailing the varied ways in which consultants interpret and respond to their school partner' behavior.

### Commendable Consultants Unanimously Name Leadership as a Critical Factor

When asked to name schooling factors that largely influence their ability to effect long term change, the consultants in my study unanimously named leadership at both district and building levels and, thus, echoed school reform literature (Bowsher, 1989; Fullan, 2001a; Huber, 2004). "Our system can be transformed into the envy of the world again. The know-how exists in this country. Right now, leadership is the only missing part of the success formula. The resources to do the job exist" (Bowsher, 1998, p. 235). Although Fullan

(2001 b) devotes entire books to affirming leadership's importance, he does insert a caveat to Bowsher, noting that administrators cannot "really solve specific instructional problems" (p. 265) and reminding readers that actual teaching-learning moments rest in the care of teachers. As I listened to my interviewees and studied their interview transcripts, it seemed they mirrored both Bowsher and Fullan. They declared the need for strong "at the top" administrative leaders; yet, they described their personal vision of consulting success as tunneled toward teacher-student learning moments.

Education literature is replete with depictions of what good leadership can do for schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2003; Creighton, 2004; Schlechty, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2000). Although my interviewees were free to respond as they wished and could have told how well administrators partner with them for school reform, they often did not. While describing the reality of school consulting, they expressed sorrow and frustration over school administration. (It must be remembered that my study participants consulted often in identified, low performing schools.) Sheryl's troubled words were typical.

I would say that I'm disappointed at the lack of knowledge and skills of administrators at the district level as well as at the building level. I think that's a huge problem in the schools. I'm talking about basic management. In some of them I am absolutely appalled at how dysfunctional they are as systems. They are very poorly managed. A lot of incompetence. In some cases I suspect that there has been some corruption. The districts that we work in sometimes will hide poverty populations.

Sheryl wondered aloud if it isn't too easy to become an administrator and suggested that the process of choosing administrators is too political and should be more thoughtfully centered upon applicants' ability to fulfill schools' specific mission and vision. She concluded, "It's as though they don't have a good model of a well functioning school district. Or if they do have that model, they aren't looking to that and gleaning from it any lessons about how they can apply that to their particular school district."

#### *District Level Leadership Is Crucial*

Participants in this research reported that their capacity for reaching teachers was facilitated or stymied by leaders who control the calendar and funds. Consultants cannot reach teacher-staffed improvement teams unless funds are available and schedules are adjusted to free teachers from their classrooms. Beyond such practical concerns, however, they identified a deeper need—systemic leader support for initiatives being shepherded by consultants, an aspect of leadership also featured in school reform literature. (Fullan, 2001; Lezotte and Jacoby, 1992; Sparks, 1998; McAdams, 1997). "The need for district support for school improvement cannot be overstated. The support must be reflected in the actions and attitudes of the superintendent, central office personnel, school board, and building administrators" (Lezotte and Jacoby, p. 9). Sparks (1998) interviewed Schlechty, author of *Better Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Reform* who explained why district level support is critical.

The primary role of district level leaders...is to create system capacity and to help others gain access to that capacity....Central office plays a key

role in articulating, communicating, and sustaining the beliefs and vision toward which action is expected to be oriented....There should be a district-level vision, and each building through its particular mission...should reflect a version of that vision (p. 41).

Eve pointed out that teachers rely on school rules and regulations while schools rely upon district rules and regulations. Therefore, only district level support of an initiative allows it to be truly systemic, and only district level support can maintain improvement momentum after the consultant has moved on. "The most sustained kind of change and the most effective type of instructional improvement comes when everyone is working toward an end and everything is aligned to support that work," she said. Eve saw this unity of purpose as necessarily originating with district leaders who not only have the authority to redirect resources toward improvement initiatives, but who can also encourage and emotionally support principals. "The higher up the leadership ladder the better it is, because if they're not in agreement, then the principal is marching to the beat of two drummers. It gets very, very difficult," Eve continued, adding that principals' good intentions sometimes are forced to take second place to "what is immediate."

This is why she likes to launch her school-consultant partnerships with conversations in which leaders at every level become clear about the improvement initiative direction. "When district people like curriculum directors and superintendents and assistants—whoever is there—work with me to map out this plan and continuously support it, that's the best case scenario." Once

underway, Eve wants “to keep the people at the very top the most informed and the most involved,” a practice she employs to prevent principals from being deterred by other pressures. Otherwise, even though she has been hired to spend a day or two in a building, the district office sometimes calls the principal out several times a day. On the other hand, “if the superintendent says okay this is a sacrosanct two days because I believe in what’s going to happen, then those kinds of things don’t happen.”

Systemic unity said by Eve to only derive from district level leadership also enhances consultant-teacher interactions.

If it is an initiative that is in a vision and a belief system and a goal that is set for the school, it’s not that I’m picking on you as a teacher. This is where we’re going, and this is the path that we’ve outlined to get there, and everyone is involved as a learner. So the tone is very important. It does make a difference when it comes to the individual, because everyone feels a part of the greater good. Everyone is part of a learning experience.

Yvonne said that when this ideal district-level vision does not exist, when she cannot get central office commitment, she feels uncomfortably forced into pushing the school improvement plan herself. Sometimes she has to “skip right over them and go directly to the teachers and work with the teachers. That is an awkward situation which unfortunately we seem to encounter in these high-risk schools.”

When Ed named district leadership as a factor critical to his efficacy, he talked about central office's obligation to install a district-wide curriculum. For a school to make sense of its standardized test achievement data, they need a curriculum aligned with their state curriculum framework, along with cognizance of grade level expectation and pacing matters. "If all that's in place, then it's not as big a challenge to look at data and make some inferences. But if you absent any of those data elements, then it would be more of a challenge."

Ed also observed that leaders of districts not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind for four or more years need to demonstrate stronger leadership by making good choices. Having recently participated in audits of his state's seriously failing schools, Ed explained,

You can embrace a change model [and/or] you can remove a principal. Most schools choose to remove a principal. Most schools say, "Well, we're going to do more of the same and change the principal." And then when we've done these audits, what we've discovered is that they haven't done either. They haven't done more of the same and they haven't changed the principal. We actually visited all category 5 and 6 schools in the state this year and found that, so they had to do some serious explaining to the Department of Ed.

#### *District and Building Level Leaders Are Sometimes Disconnected*

Speaking collectively, consultants and improvement literature agree that district leaders are essential to school improvement because ideally they blanket the district with a single vision. Continually flowing commitment from central



office to building staff encourages teachers to welcome consultants and their message. Additionally, district level engagement frees resources such as time and funds for reform work and places curricular tools into practitioners' hands. This is the ideal described in literature (Fullan, 2001 b; Lezotte and Jacoby, 1992), but my study participants noted breaks between district and building level leadership.

Sheryl noted a disconnect between principals and district administration. She said that she spends far more time with principals than with superintendents, and she observes that principals are often limited by district people who either don't view change positively or who don't know how to manage change. Ed reported a similar problem, saying that when he talks with principals they complain less about teachers than they do about non-supportive district leaders. Principals speak of not having adequate time to plan for improvement initiatives, insufficient professional development resources, or even "insufficient support for just cleaning up the building." Eve commented that if district people including curriculum directors, superintendents, and assistants don't work with her "to map out this plan and continuously support it, then principals "are just as isolated as a teacher is in a classroom."

Sheryl reported that sometimes the disconnect between district and building level leaders moves dangerously beyond mere lack of support.

We've been at districts where central office people are the greatest obstacle and just made it almost impossible to do the work. They've transferred principals indiscriminately. They've withheld money. They've

not reimbursed people for their stipends and their expenses. They're passive aggressive in the sense that they are not reporting back to the individual school what's been spent, or they report back faulty information. They withhold writing checks. They withhold providing payment if there have been requests for supplies.

It's amazing to me. In one case a big chunk of a central office administrator's salary was taken out of the grant. The finance person didn't realize that. Full authority for allocation for that money rested with one individual in central office. School people are not told how much they have. They think they're being given a gift when the central office official says, "Oh, well, you can have subs one day a month to have your groups." They've made every school effort into a battle so that the school people want to just give up. It's hardly worth it when they have to fight their central office. In some cases it's from the superintendent on down. In other cases it's from people in a central office role that report to the superintendent. There are some districts that we will not go back and work in because the central office people have just made it a nightmare. It has been very, very difficult. So I would say district leadership is a primary factor.

Unlike Sheryl, Ann does not work for a model provider, but through her position as a part-time state department of education consultant, she has monitored many model-school pairings and agrees that districts are highly influential upon their success. For example, even though model providers attempt to exercise authority and require districts to help individual schools set

aside teacher meeting times, Ann has seen that unless districts choose to actively support the initiative by “providing an environment in which that can happen, it doesn’t happen.”

*Building Level Leadership is Also Critical*

Although the consultants I interviewed emphasized the importance of central office support, they also spoke ardently about building level leadership. When asked what administrator features most impact schools’ ability to improve, Sheryl replied,

The principal leader is a critical position. They have to be knowledgeable about their craft. They also have to have the personal attributes they need to forge strong relationships with their staff members. They need a vision. They need to be knowledgeable about data and how data needs to drive decisions. They need to look at research around best instructional practice. They need to be very knowledgeable about the standards, the content standards and the standards of instructional assessment so that they can talk it as well as walk it with staff members. They are willing to give up staff meeting time and whatever it takes.

Hill (2004) continues Sheryl’s description of capable principals. “Schools needs heads who can lead staff in negotiating the white water of constantly changing social pressures and student needs” (p. 70). Listing multiple expectations that principals face while attempting to satisfy community constituencies as well as staff and student needs, Hill concludes, “It is too much

for many people. To fulfill all these expectations, principals need more time and energy than is available to normal human beings” (p. 70).

It should be noted that not all research assigns such importance to principals. Witziers, Bosker, and Krüger (2003) report that “educational researchers and practitioners hold different views regarding ways that schools principals improve educational outcomes” (p. 400). Some researchers report direct correlation between principals and student achievement, but others do not make that connection. Witziers et al., who conducted meta-analyses on studies into “the direct effects of educational leadership on student achievement conducted between 1986 and 1996” (p. 404), suggest that differing research methods and multiple changes in the way that “educational leadership has been conceptualized and operationalized” (p. 402) over time could account for such variance of findings. “The results [of this meta-analysis] suggest that school leadership does have a positive and significant effect on student achievement” (p. 408), especially at the primary level. The most significant positive relationships between leadership behaviors and student outcomes were found in administrative: (a) supervision and evaluation, (b) monitoring, (c) visibility, and (d) defining and communicating mission (p. 410). Witziers et al. found that one specific leadership behavior, namely, conducting activities aimed at improving and developing the school appears to have a negative relationship with student achievement” (p. 410). However, further analysis revealed that principals’ reports of efforts to work with teachers were linked to schools where expected student achievement levels were low, indicating again that leadership research can be

muddled by ambiguities in subject populations. The results of this meta-analysis were inconclusive, leading researchers to conclude that we need to understand how school leaders influence school culture, but that in order to do so, “better conceptualization of the phenomenon of educational leadership is needed” (p. 416).

McEwan (1998), on the other hand, feels that the time for declaring the importance of school leadership is now. He enthusiastically urges principals to adopt a strong leader stance and cites research indicating that “the normal equivalent gain scores of students in schools led by strong instructional leaders as perceived by the teachers in their respective schools, were significantly greater...than those of students in schools rated as having average or weak leaders” (p. 16).

As I examined school leadership literature and my research participants’ responses to interview questions, I was often reminded that they spoke from their on-site experience, not from research. When they described principals in action, they encapsulated their immersion (albeit temporary) into client school cultures, a location from which they wholeheartedly concluded that principals do affect school life and student achievement. Moreover, it should be noted that my participants were not asked to provide definitive proof that principal leadership matters, but rather to contribute to the original purpose of this study, which was discovery of commendable consultants’ *perceptions* of consultant-school partnering.

*Some principals are defensive.*

Ed believes that principals' behavior regarding improvement initiatives may be heavily influenced by their "willingness and ability to accept help from an outsider." When he visits schools, he sometimes notes that a principal is feeling threatened by central office and seems to view a consultant's presence as indication that central office doesn't believe he or she is capable of generating school improvement. "The likelihood is that they'll not be as engaged or supportive or outgoing as they ordinarily would be, because obviously they're feeling a little bit of a threat there." When Ed detects principal insecurity, he reassures the principal that he is there solely to help the principal accomplish goals, not to send reports to central office. Ed's discussion of principal concerns proved to be another example of his tendency to balance criticism with compassion. He said,

*I expect principals to be sincere and honest in what they are trying to do, but my experience is that many times it's just an issue of they don't know what to do. They've tried everything. They're trying to do everything, and sometimes they just don't understand school improvement or school reform. Or they're trying to work hard at a remedy that worked for them in a previous school or worked for them in their previous community and that won't necessarily be effective for them in their current environment.*

*Yvonne also searches for ways to work with defensive principals who often assume that "everybody's blaming them." She recognizes that most often the principal of an identified school is not allowed to choose the consultant*

assigned to him by his state's department of education. This might exacerbate a principal's negative feelings toward her.

You can expect resistance, hostility—I mean it would run the whole gamut of emotions, because they're going to feel threatened by this expert.

They're also going to be ready to tell you many reasons why everything you're doing isn't right for their situation and why what they've been doing is right. You constantly have to go back to—well, that may be, but here's the data. Students aren't achieving. Your staff isn't trained. You're not following a curriculum. You just have to keep throwing the facts back, but it can be miserable.

According to Yvonne, all consultants are not so capable of working with defensive principals, and they feel quite defeated.

Other consultants I've interacted with who have gone in to these same kinds of buildings have had just awful experiences and did not last more than a year where it was mutually agreeable. They were happy to get out of there and the school was literally pushing them out the door. Very highly qualified excellent people, but they couldn't get past that principal or certain administrators just being thoroughly threatened by them.

*Consultants find ways to work around inept principals.*

*In addition to evaluating principal's capacity for change, the consultants I studied measured principals' ability to lead and, in so doing, also revealed their attitude toward inept principals. Ed began, "There are principals that like the title and like to be called doctor and have a big sign for their car and are always gone*

to important meetings so they're not in the building as much, that kind of person." After saying that some principals are competitive, power driven, status oriented, motivated by "fluff" and looking good, and "just shouldn't be there," he added, "but I try not to make a judgment on that, because what's more important to me is finding the leadership within the group." Because Ed believes that domineering principals do "very little for maintaining change over time," he turns away from the principal just described and searches for a group in the building to work with instead. He believes that a group force such as an improvement team can sustain change long after he has left in spite of having weak leadership. As proof that an improvement team can overcome principal ineptitude, he cites a study completed by the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Lab (Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003), which did a meta-analysis of over 3,000 research studies on leadership. They identified competencies that must be present in order to increase student achievement in a building. Ed reported that Waters, et al. found that "the capacity for those competencies have to be in the building. They don't necessarily have to reside with the principal, but they have to be inherent either with the school improvement team or with the teacher leaders or whatever."

Because inept principals are easily sidetracked, Eve struggles to keep them focused upon change initiatives. "Change is hard and change also has the connotation that maybe I haven't done this right before. Maybe I failed and, therefore, maybe I need to change." She finds that such principals try to continue doing the familiar and that it very often "gets to be kind of a struggle to keep a principal even focused." Similarly to Ed, Eve copes with an inept principal by



turning to others. She said, "We have some teacher leaders who are more knowledgeable and skilled than their principal." When Eve runs into such situations, she hopes the principal will "empower [them] and get out of the way, which is the case in some of our schools." Eve prefers, of course, to find both skilled teachers and principals. "When you get the combination of the two, it's very compelling and success is much more assured."

Sheryl also strives to help schools make progress in spite of a "principal [who] might be rather weak. It can't happen though very easily if the principal throws road blocks in the way. So the principal is the key factor in the school culture."

Yvonne reported that this matter of staff quality is not one-sided. She seems as likely to find superior skill in either the principal or teaching staff.

Sometimes you can have a really dynamite staff and a really awful principal. And that staff can never rise to their potential because the principal is almost getting in the way. Or then the other hand you can see a real motivated principal with a terrible staff that just digs in and they're not going to do anything. Then principals burn out because they can't possibly do it all themselves.

Over all, my interviewees indicated that they expect to find notable ability differences among their client principals and teachers and that the precise mix in any one school must be discovered with each new partnership. This seemed to be an accepted aspect of consulting, experienced and routinely coped with by all of my participants.

*Instructional leaders practicing distributed leadership are needed.*

The consultants agreed, as do researchers, that the best principals are instructional leaders who thoroughly understand teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2005, McEwan, 1998; Boris-Schacter and Langer, 2006; O'Donnell and White, 2005). Yvonne suggested that only persons with extensive teaching training and outstanding teaching records should be chosen as principals, but this too often isn't the case.

People who get to be the principal often are people who maybe...know how to golf! Now I'm just being a smart aleck. I know it's more than that, but there are times when I often wonder. For a long time the person who was the athletic coach got to be the principal of a building.

Yvonne explained that she is sensitive to the issue of inept principals because of the diminishing effect they have upon teaching and learning in high needs schools.

Very often number one you generally see an ineffective principal—a person who has been too caught up with just managing the day to day operation and isn't spending any time on the real philosophical bigger issues of instruction. You generally see a lack of respect. Now I don't mean that the principal necessarily disrespects the staff, But the staff—it doesn't take them long to disrespect a principal who doesn't know anything about teaching and learning. And it's pretty obvious pretty quick. A lot of times a staff can be kept happy by a principal being a good disciplinarian, because they feel that every time they send kids down.... Then they'll get along and

they'll forgive an ineffective leader up to a point, but they still won't respect him. So I think what I see going on in places where there are problems, usually there is a real wall between the principal and the teachers, and from my experience it's usually because the principal doesn't get it. And the teachers have caught on. And they're tired of it.

Yvonne concluded, "In this day and age it's hard to believe there are people out there like that, but I assure you they're all over the place."

Ann links instructional leadership with shared decision making among principals and teachers, a practice that she and others call distributed or collective leadership (Martin, 2006; Spillane, 2001). When she visits schools, she wants to see principals sharing leadership with the teachers and providing the leadership team opportunity to dialogue about the school's goals and action plan. She believes so strongly that distributed leadership will enhance her ability to effect positive change for her client schools that when she visits schools she requires that "in addition to meeting with the principal [she] be allowed to also meet with the principal and the leadership team together." She does this as a means of modeling distributed leadership to the principal.

In order for a principal or an administrator to be an instructional leader they've got to share some of the responsibility of running the school and involve stakeholders in some of the decisions about what's in the best interest of the school and students. The principal shares some of that leadership, that decision making with other staff members—teachers. And I also encourage them to include parents. Many times in those schools

that are identified as high need, I see less collaboration. There is not as much collaboration between the principal and the stakeholders and teachers and there is very little shared leadership. The principal pretty much holds the reins very tight. You don't see the capacity building going on because folks just are not involved. There's just a disconnect between administrator, teachers, students, and parents. You don't find an atmosphere that supports high levels of student achievement. In most high-performing schools, you find high levels of collaboration.

Davey (1971) concurs and offers an ideal contrast in which even before real improvement initiative work begins, the consultant is able to detect signs of instructional leadership through the manner in which the consultant is hired and introduced to the staff. According to Davey, rather than imposing an unwanted consultant on teachers, an instructional leader principal would invite teachers to participate in pre-partnership discussions during which they might: (1) determine why a consultant is needed, (2) agree to retain a consultant, and (3) decide which consultant to hire (p. 153). It follows that a principal functioning as an instructional leader could then notify the new consultant how consensus was reached, thus signaling that interactive teacher-principal relationships are operational in his or her school.

Eve reported that distributed leadership among her principals and teachers impacts improvement implementation. Persons in client buildings responsible for promoting professional learning among staff members need to be included in the planning for professional training. Her reason is that much of the

work will fall upon them. "It's crucial that they be on board and included in all conversations." As did Ann, Eve also noted, "Usually when you go to schools with poor results, most of the time those practices are not in place." She studies student achievement data prior to visiting a client school for the first time, and experience has shown her, "Generally that [low achievement] means that the whole scope of leadership which encourages interaction between and among professionals and provides opportunity for that interaction does not exist or exists minimally."

Ed and Yvonne affirmed Ann and Eve's consensus. Ed said, "No Child Left Behind expects these teachers to now be taking ownership of the school and to be directly involved in all key decisions in the school. And what we're finding is typically they aren't." Yvonne indicated that a principal lacking in instructional leadership skills does not engage in distributed leadership. "I'll be very honest with you. In the buildings I've been involved with, there is no such thing as a leadership team." When I expressed surprise, she explained,

The biggest problem that's going on there [her client schools] is that there is no clear leadership. And there is not necessarily a real strong principal to begin with. Sometimes a new principal comes in and they're stronger, but I mean these buildings that aren't making adequate yearly progress and are continuing down the spiral, they often are not there yet with leadership teams. There may be a group of lead teachers who have been pulled together to work with the school principal to work on school planning and all that. But to say that they would be the team that would

walk around with me, uh, no. That doesn't happen. At least not yet. That isn't happening.

*A tale of two principals.*

One day Yvonne recorded and mailed me the following account in which she finds the import of instructional leadership personified in two principals. I report Yvonne's story not only to give voice to her call for instructional leadership, but also to give witness to the effect that client schools can have upon consultants with whom they partner.

I want to comment on something I'm going to call a tale of two principals. My [consulting] colleagues and I spent a day at a new urban charter school. We were there to do a program audit and confirm compliance with legislative requirements for grant recipients. We met what I would consider one of the most dynamic principals that I've seen in a long time. Here's a young woman who has taken over a failing charter school to re-start, kind of like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. In one year's time they've made tremendous progress and have made adequate yearly progress. When I went through the visit with this principal, I was just pleased and amazed at her grasp of what it's all about—high expectation, high standards, monitoring instruction, an aligned curriculum, assessment, reviewing assessment regularly, adapting programs so that if children aren't getting what they're supposed to get then you stop and re-teach to mastery. And it wasn't just talk. I mean as we went through with her staff, it was just incredible. It was easy to see why they made great gains in a

short amount of time. They were working hard; their focus was on the right things; and they were getting results in a short amount of time. I'm going to be very interested to watch this academy, because I think it's going to have some real success stories.

The reason I'm saying this is a story of two principals is because the week before, we had done a diagnostic visit in an urban elementary school that has about the same student population, same minority makeup, and the same low student achievement as the original charter school had. This public school had been identified for improvement; yet that school had layers and layers of central support people coming into their building and all kinds of coaches and specialists working with the teachers. They weren't making dramatic improvement, but they were starting to make improvement. While interviewing that principal, I saw that she was just sort of worn out. She said there was never time to be the instructional leader because she had to be the manager of the school. She just didn't get it.

I just was amazed by meeting in one week's time two women faced with the same situations in many ways. The one at the charter school has very little outside extra help. She does have to report to her sponsoring university, and they do supply some guidance there. But she wasn't getting all kinds of specialists and experts in the building to work with her. She had to set up her own system and make sure things were happening by herself, whereas the public elementary principal where they have all

kinds of resources and all kinds of specialists and all layers of people helping out just didn't seem to get the idea that her number one job was to be the instructional leader. Her excuse was there's never any time.

I guess I feel there are other underlying factors. The academy principal isn't working within a union framework, so when she directs people to do things, they do it. They know if they don't do it, they may not have a job next year. But I think what I was more astounded by was the attitude of this individual and the full commitment to what being a principal is all about. You have got to be the instructional leader, and that has to come before everything else. Before all the doo-dads, and details, and cutesy stuff, the bottom line is we're supposed to be teaching kids so they can succeed in life. How do we know if we're doing the right thing? How do I keep my staff on target? How do I provide them with the resources to do the job right?

I was just pleased to meet a principal like this, because I don't see too many of them anymore. When I go to these schools that are identified for improvement, I'm seeing a lot of people who just don't get it. I really wish I could clone this young lady and put her in some of the schools I work with. People like her are sorely needed to get people to finally do what they're supposed to do and to serve children. That is what the whole issue of public schools is all about. I am just really delighted with what this young woman is doing.



Anyway that's my tale of two principals and how attitude and understanding can really make the difference. Being reflective, having a philosophy and a commitment to education—that's what it's really all about.

### *Leader Participation in Initiatives is Needed*

According to some of my study participants, teachers need assurance that their leaders are championing improvement initiatives and they receive that assurance through administrators' physical presence. Ann said, "Building level administrative leadership is very critical. We need administrators to really step up and be participatory in the entire reform process and to lead it and to do the following up and to do the monitoring." She noted that improvement plans are often not viewed as important by teachers unless principals are involved in leading them. "Administrators have to indicate that this is important. This is what we expect, and this is what we're going to do. It's going to be monitored, and everybody is going to be held accountable including the administrator." When administrators do not attend sessions led by her and, therefore, do not lend their credibility to the activity, Ann sees that "as being a real disadvantage to the staff." One reason is that if the principal does stay to the end, there is opportunity for that leader and teachers to plan follow-up actions and to agree upon everyone's next role. Without such closure, participants leave uncertain of the initiative's future.

Ed holds a much more tolerant view of principals' absence from consultant led sessions, saying that sometimes principals don't attend because they are

covering classrooms for teacher attendees. "I think it's more often out of necessity. I think more often than not they'd like to be there. I make it clear they don't have to be there, but they're certainly welcome." He went on to say that in schools not making AYP, teacher absentee rates are high, which makes it even harder to cover classrooms when Ed arrives to work with teachers.

Eve wishes that she had greater opportunity to work with district leaders and for teachers to see district personnel at school improvement events. "For me it's...the leadership comes from way up at the top which is the district level. I don't very often get to work with district leadership—I mean I may see them; I may talk with them; they may agree with me, but they don't necessarily participate in the life of a school at the district level the way they need to."

When Yvonne voiced concern about lack of administrative support for improvement initiatives, she grouped district and building level leaders together, saying that neither demonstrated adequate sustained, visible interest in her work.

Today I want to talk about an interesting issue that I think plays a part in getting in the way of a consultant being able to do his or her work. That is the role that the superintendent, other central administration, or principals play in any reform effort. The impression I get when I talk with other consultants is that many times when the district selects a reform movement or uses a grant to get a reform movement in place and hires someone like me to come in, it's almost like they wash their hands of their responsibility. It's like okay it's your job now. And the problem you run into is that when they do such a thing they also seem to permit themselves to

not participate. I'm just astounded at the lack of involvement or participation I get from the superintendent. I make the person aware and send reminders and hear all kind of lip service. Yeah, this is what we've got to do. And then the activity occurs and they're not there. Or they're there, but they just make a brief appearance and get out as fast as they can. And the same is true of the board. Even though we keep them informed and in the loop, their understanding that they need to show that this is what we're going to do is absent. It's just really uncanny how that occurs.

Unfortunately, in some of these at risk buildings, I run into the same situation with the principals. You tell them here's what we're doing and it's going to involve your students, your parents, your staff, and they don't show up. Or they stay for five minutes and spend the rest of the time in the hall or getting on their cell phones. This is really a stumbling block in the effort to improve schools. As an outside consultant, I'm not coming in with the magic pill or silver bullet. It takes the commitment and presence of the administration to lead the thing. They should be using me as their advisor or guide, but they need to be the one leading the charge, and that just isn't happening. I'm not seeing it, which is probably why so many of these schools are in trouble to begin with. Somebody just doesn't see it as their job to be in charge of the instructional program, and they just don't think they have enough time to do all this stuff.

Ann said that when building administrators make only a token appearance at improvement work sessions and then leave, she gives them until her next break to reappear. If they don't, she hunts them up and reminds them that the session will be continuing shortly. She said they often take the hint and reappear.

While speaking about leadership in their client schools, my study's participants emphasized the need for commitment from both district and building administrators. In their view, school reform requires reallocation of multiple resources including funding, time use, and administration presence—changes highly visible to teachers. Skilled instructional leader principals practicing distributed leadership most effectively fulfill their roles as consultants' partners for school improvement.

In the next section, I report participants' observation that district and building administrators' commitment levels influence teachers' beliefs about consultants and the reform mission.

#### Commendable Consultants Name Teacher Beliefs as an Influential Factor

When I asked the interviewed consultants to identify schooling factors that impact their ability to make long-lasting change, they spoke extensively about teacher beliefs and simultaneously revealed their own personally-held attitudes toward teachers' beliefs. It is not surprising that my respondents included teacher beliefs in their list of influential factors. Both school reform and organizational change literature address the impact of member beliefs upon change initiatives

(Green, 1968; Kotter, 1996; Lippitt, 1958; Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1990; Sparks, 1998).

### *Teachers Beliefs Affect Systemic School Improvement*

While being interviewed by Sparks (1998), author Phillip Schlechty spoke about the need for educational leaders to understand how beliefs affect school change. "We have to help school leaders understand the centrality of beliefs in the change process. Getting clear about beliefs is critical, but using them to direct action is also important. It's essential that we help principals and superintendents understand the power of beliefs." In an attempt to depict the power of beliefs, Green (1968) visualizes a belief system as a set of concentric circles with primitive (basic) beliefs, those "with greatest psychological strength, those which we are most prone to accept without question" (p. 40) in the inner circle. His use of a concentric circle model does not imply that belief systems are logically construed. Instead, beliefs in the core center are "psychologically central" (p. 40). "People adopt opinions not only to understand the world, but also to meet the psychological and social needs to live with themselves and others" (Jervis, 2006). The psychological and social value of beliefs affect their location in the concentric circle construct, but so does timing. "Another consistent finding...is that the degree to which teachers cling to their beliefs is linked to how early the beliefs were formed (Murphy, Delli, and Edwards, 2004, p. 71). Pajares (1992) explains that timing affects not only a belief's position relative to core beliefs, but also its resilience. "The earlier a belief is incorporated into the belief structure, the more difficult it is to alter, for these beliefs subsequently affect perception and

strongly influence the processing of new information....For this reason...new acquired beliefs are most vulnerable" (Pajares, 1992, p. 317). Concepts of position (position relative to core, inner circle beliefs) along with age (length of time held to be true) are concepts with which administrators and consultants must grapple. Both will impact the ease or difficulty with which leaders and change agents introduce and maneuver change initiatives through school systems.

Although an educational leader bent upon school change needs to understand how his particular staff's beliefs are imprinting his school's culture, doing so is not easy. Green (1968) explains this is because there is a difference between specific beliefs that people hold and the way in which they hold them.

We can, for example, believe something strongly or not, with passion or not, for good reasons or not. Two persons may hold the same belief with a different measure of strength, with more or less adequate reasons, or on more or less adequate evidence. They may, on the contrary, believe different things with equal strength, reasons, or evidence.

To understand these differences, we have to recognize that people seldom if ever hold to a belief in isolation, in total independence of other beliefs. Each of us, in fact, possesses a whole system of beliefs, and we can understand that in this system there may occur different arrangements. Thus, two persons may hold to similar beliefs and yet they may hold them in quite different arrangements. Thus the order of one's beliefs is a property of belief systems conceptually distinct from their

content, and this can be described as a contrast between the beliefs we hold and how we hold them. (p. 38)

When we superimpose Green's concentric circle image over his assertion that belief content does not equal belief order, we understand that teachers may identify the content of their beliefs without revealing each belief's location in their belief system. So called lip service does not guarantee loyalty to a concept or, in the consultants' case, to an improvement initiative. As the consultants speak about beliefs, we will see that they face many complexities when they attempt to interpret and influence clients' beliefs.

Literature examines the impact that teachers' beliefs have upon teaching practice (Deemer, 2004; Kise, 2006; Richardson, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer, 2004). "Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and priorities are linked closely to their classroom behavior and practices....Teachers make constant decisions in their classrooms, and their beliefs, attitudes, and priorities provide a framework for these decisions" (Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer, p. 322). Simply stating that teacher beliefs influence teacher behavior, however, is an oversimplification of what consultants' need to know. As consultants visit client schools, they also need to recognize and label specific beliefs that they see being manifested through teachers' actions. Accurate identification of client beliefs gives a consultant a strong basis for building a reform plan on positive beliefs present among staff members, while ameliorating beliefs that bode danger for improvement initiatives. Kise suggests four helpful questions for consultants: (1) What are teachers' beliefs about how students learn, (2) How tightly are

teachers' beliefs tied to their own strengths as educators, (3) What are the teachers' beliefs about their roles in student success, and (4) what else keeps teachers from trying new practices (p. 10). As teachers answer these questions, they reveal their beliefs. Not only can the consultant identify beliefs likely to have generative and degenerative affects on improvement initiatives, she can also locate candidates among staff members for a core team of supporters.

Kise (2006) describes an evolving mental process through which new teachers gradually form comfortable teaching styles by instinctively shying away from their weak areas and gravitating toward their strengths. What began as new teacher survival transforms into teaching belief, and eventually the teacher believes that her most comfortable teaching style is also best for students. Such beliefs sometimes take root as preferences and eventually grow into habitual practice. For example, Kise describes the artistic teacher who convinces herself that all students need opportunities for artistic expression in every unit of study.

Beliefs can also rise out of contrast, as when a teacher inwardly declares his teaching to be more or less effective than the norm and by comparing himself to others forms beliefs about his ability to teach (Hoy and Woolfolk, 1993; Rimm-Kauffman and Sawyer, 2004). This process begins when teachers observe students' responses to teaching conditions. Next they build beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching. Hoy and Woolfolk see division within some teachers' beliefs about efficacy, because teachers do not always situate themselves among the general teacher population. Their opinion about the quality of typical teaching is not necessarily replicated in their belief about their



own teaching. They may consider themselves to be exceptions to the norm (either more or less effective than teacher peers).

Because consultants typically interact with multiple behaviors every working day, they are naturally interested in how teachers' beliefs influence their actions. Pajares (1992) suggests that teacher behavior is the final step in a natural progression. The teacher brings beliefs about teaching to the classroom, then tests those beliefs through observation, forms perceptions of reality, and finally acts upon those perceptions. In Pajares' scenario, teacher beliefs take on a more active role than merely offering teachers pedagogical comfort zones or sense of place among colleagues. Beliefs can help teachers interpret what they see in classrooms and then plan subsequent action. In Pajares' view, the teacher blends pre-conceived beliefs with what he currently sees happening before his eyes, and forms "situation specific and action oriented" (p. 314) perspectives. Returning to the artistic teacher mentioned earlier, belief simply affirms her natural inclinations. In the case of the self-evaluating teacher, believing himself to be superior or inferior does not necessarily motivate him to action. However, a teacher who melds belief with observation of one particular location, often her classroom, might use her resultant perspective to launch herself into action. It is at this point that a consultant might choose to either soften adverse beliefs or highlight supportive beliefs.

This brief literature review illuminates complexities surrounding teacher beliefs and reminds us that consultants who accurately identify beliefs and guide clients toward sound decisions are indeed skilled. They are especially skilled

when they are able to open teachers' minds to belief adjustments and help them gain new perspectives that permit change. In the following sections, we will hear the consultants' sensitivity toward clients' beliefs.

### *Consultants' Views of Teacher Beliefs*

Although the consultants' statements about client beliefs are grouped into categories, it would be problematic to claim that consultants hold such an entity as a single consistent belief or a belief that is easy to compare to another consultant's belief. The five consultants formed their beliefs through diverse career experiences, and they situate professional beliefs variously near to or far from their core basic beliefs. Moreover, they have consulted for different lengths of time and, thus, have held their beliefs through varying lengths of time. It is not my intent here to compare and contrast either teachers' beliefs or attitudes voiced by my participants. Instead, I report them on the following pages collectively in an attempt to better understand how commendable consultants interpret clients' beliefs and respond to them.

When Sheryl indicated that teacher beliefs affect her ability to be effective and I asked her to quantify that impact, she responded, "Oh, it's huge." She said that during her first session with a new client school she tries to connect her model's values with teachers' beliefs. "We go through an exercise that tries to illuminate what their belief system is and have them do that personal reflection in small group work." Sheryl then helps teachers recognize the points of connection between her model and themselves and, thus, internalize beliefs co-owned by all

members of their school-consultant partnership. "It definitely is a connection that we try to make very early in the process."

Ann adopted a far less aggressive stance than Sheryl toward melding teacher beliefs with her consulting plan. Speaking about teacher beliefs, she said, "That does affect me, but I think you just have to give it time. Folks are very discouraged very often because they're being labeled as an unsuccessful school. Certainly that does very little for the morale of the teacher."

Attempting to understand motives, Eve looks beyond present teacher behavior that appears to indicate beliefs antagonistic toward reform, because she expects that in many schools teachers do believe in improvement initiatives. For example, they tell her that they have tried hard to put their professional development training into effect without seeming to realize that the missing component is self-monitoring. They don't know how to measure student growth after implementation of new practices.

People may think they are working hard and very often they are. They're working extremely hard, but they're not at all working smart. And my job becomes—how do you shift that work ethic toward smart work rather than just "I'm here from early morning till late at night"?

As my interviewees considered how teachers' beliefs impact consultants' ability to counsel successfully, they also spoke about teachers' desire and ability to collaborate, staff turn-over, attitudes toward students, and the resistance factor.

## *Teacher Beliefs Influence Their Desire and Ability to Collaborate with Consultants*

Teacher beliefs about their schooling experience are formed largely within the context of their working environment (Mintrop, 2004; Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1990). At the very time when their school has been identified as a low performer, when low student achievement calls for heightened teacher collaboration with principals and consultants, teachers' desire and ability to collaborate may sink to new lows. Embarrassment, confusion, fear of pending change, and internal political upheaval may cause teachers to emotionally withdraw from colleagues and leaders, as well as outside experts. To better understand this phenomenon, Mintrop researched schools that had been labeled as low performing. He found that teachers' first responses included shock and embarrassment, followed by self-removal from blame. "When teachers welcomed probation, they saw it either as a way to garner support [funding] or as a wake-up call for others. But they rarely directed such a wake-up at themselves" (p. 27).

Continuing his investigation into the behavior of teachers from identified schools, Mintrop (2004) investigated the assumption that the entire faculty of an identified school would strive together toward systemic improvement, and he found that frequently just the opposite occurred. Some teachers are veterans of school innovation and no longer believe that newly proposed procedures will make a difference. Others are just not pre-disposed toward change and retreat from it rather than join fellow faculty members in a collaborative reform effort.

Mintrop (2004) thus highlighted a problem uncovered by Davey (1971) who found that organization members' willingness to work with outside consultants was greatly influenced by staff interaction immediately prior to the consultant's arrival. From the moment that a leader "initiates the possibility or desirability of considering consultant help" (p. 27), internal factors begin to mold members' eventual attitude toward that consultant. Choice of persons invited to decide if a consultant is needed, the leadership level at which improvement initiative decisions are made, amount of input allowed from all levels, and whether staff members are permitted to meet consultant candidates—all such matters influence teachers' inclination to collaborate with their consultant. Davey also suggests that members' beliefs about the original reason for the consultant's presence are influential. "An urgent appeal to assist with a dramatically serious situation, resulting from the ineffectiveness or inappropriateness of internally sponsored attempts" (p.29), may develop into a partnership quite different than one launched out of calm consensus. At the very time identified by Davey when teachers need to listen to each other and to leadership, Mintrop finds they are least inclined to do so.

Yvonne suggested a different reason that teachers may refuse to work with consultants. In some cases teachers dare not support proposed improvement plans because they feel inadequate to see them through.

You're dealing with very dysfunctional organizations. They didn't get there because they were doing all the right things. They got there because they

haven't been doing the right things and because they just don't seem to have the culture or the right people in the places to lead the change.

Yvonne also suggested that client staffs sometimes do not recognize that change is needed and that it's their responsibility to take the initiative.

If they don't see why they should have to change, if they don't see that it's their responsibility to take whatever steps are needed, you have a real problem. Change is very threatening to people in bureaucracies and institutions because they're just not equipped for it. You run into a lot of – well we've always done it this way, so we're going to keep doing it this way. That's my biggest frustration. They want you to come in, but they don't really want to be told or shown that changes are needed.

#### *Frequent Staff Turnover Weakens Faith in Newly Adopted Initiatives*

When consultants offered their opinions about what prevents teachers in failing schools from productively interacting with principals and consultants, they spoke about high staff turnover. Ed said this was the complaint he heard from school improvement teachers "more than anything." When districts cut back on staff and restructuring decisions are based on seniority, improvement teams may lose members and, thus, their ability to move seamlessly forward the following year. When I asked Ed if the school board couldn't choose to hold a staff together while their school is undergoing improvement initiatives, he replied,

Well, that's what they complain about. The district is loath to say to the union, "Look these high priority schools—we're not going to dink around

with them. The staff will stay in place for a minimum of 3-5 years.” They could do that, but they’re loath to do that for whatever reason.

Yvonne echoed Ed’s finding and spoke about how quickly a change initiative can bend under the pressure of constant adjustment. “People change and others come on board and they don’t get them to training to use the prescribed text or resources correctly. They do it one year and then they drop it. That’s important.”

Teacher turnover is not the only issue. Ann voiced concern about frequent leadership turnover. She said, “Part of the reason I feel that they [identified schools] are high priority and maintain that status is they’re changing the leadership in the building sometimes twice in the school year but at least every year.” Before teachers have an opportunity to thoroughly implement improvement plans, a new administrator arrives. “Many times you have a whole new agenda and you’re starting from scratch again.” I questioned Ann about the cause of rapid administrator turnover, and she described district leadership feeling pressure to make some kind of change in order to “get them on the road to success.” They believe that they should begin with the administrator. “Because they don’t know what to do and there’s no panacea, they just start with the school leadership.” She said that boards under pressure often give new administrators just one year to produce results. I asked if exiting administrators tend to inform their replacements about her work and improvement plans that she has begun, and she replied, “I don’t know for sure. I know that in some instances there are a lot of hurt feelings, and I don’t know that that discussion takes place.” She said

that if the principal feels he or she is being displaced unfairly, “that conversation might never happen.”

*Weakened Faith in Students Enervates Faith in School Reform Programs*

Teachers’ inability to improve their teaching and generate progressing student achievement sometimes withers teachers’ faith in their students. Eve explained, “*These kids...* You hear *these kids* all the time. They give you a million reasons for low student achievement—their poverty level, their second language learning level, the percentage of special education.” Sheryl’s experience was similar to Eve’s.

It’s really interesting how you will find people in our schools that are very quick to blame others for the situation that they find themselves in when they have students that are difficult to teach or have difficulty learning. They are very quick to point to the community, the times, etc. rather than responding to the research that says that teachers do make a difference and good teaching is as great a factor in how well kids learn as any of the baggage that they bring with them.

Eve did not accept teachers’ excuses.

All of those things may exist in that school, but if you look at data over a period of time and you analyze movement and you see how much they’ve moved and what populations have moved, you can get a pretty good picture of the instruction you are going to see when you get there. When you’ve been in education long enough and have worked with many school



systems—when 60-70% of the data is below proficiency levels, you know the teaching in that school has a lot to be desired.

Yvonne had heard teacher excuses identical to those voiced by Eve. “It’s *these kids*. There’s always something wrong with the kids or the parents.” Like Eve, Yvonne refused to absolve teachers from responsibility.

They’ve got to get over that. If they don’t, nothing is going to change, because they’re making excuses. They say they don’t need to change anything they’re doing or look at things differently. It’s “I don’t have the right materials. The kids don’t behave. The parents don’t care.’

In contrast, Yvonne pointed out that schools throughout the nation “achieve great success with high poverty, high minority students because they don’t accept that as an excuse.” She brought the matter back to teacher beliefs, saying that teachers need to believe in their students and in their ability to teach. “The beliefs of the teachers have to be that these are the best kids I’ve got in my classroom. I know how to teach. We see little islands of excellence all over the place with teachers who get it,” Yvonne said emphatically. Research of the type Yvonne referenced is reported by Corbett, Wilson, and Williams (2005). During a three-year research project, teachers from urban schools were interviewed. Many “cited what they viewed as insurmountable obstacles” (p. 8), but the researchers found two teachers who “believed that the responsibility for student success rested on educators’ shoulders” (p. 8). Their constant vigilance, encouragement, and refusal to let students fail, led the researchers to conclude, “Effective teaching meant giving students no other choice but success” (p. 12).

Yvonne continued,

When an individual teacher rises above that sort of stuff and says, “I really care about children and I know kids can learn and I know I can do it and I’m not restricted by any given textbook. I can use all of my intelligence and creativity to meet the needs of kids, and we’re going to make every minute count in this classroom,” you see things happen. So I think so much has to do with what they believe about how children can learn and their own ability to get the point across.

Unlike Sheryl, Eve, and Yvonne, Ann reported few encounters with teachers who don’t believe that all students can learn. When asked if she runs into the attitude that particular children cannot learn she replied,

I do from time to time, but I don’t think that’s the prevailing feeling that I’ve encountered. If that’s the case it’s not told to me. Overwhelmingly, the teachers that I encounter feel that children can learn. They want us to help them do that and to do a better job of it.

Ann also adopted a decidedly forgiving tone toward schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress. “Most of my schools are schools that have been identified as high-priority. It doesn’t mean that they’re not good, but maybe for a couple of years or several years, students have not done well on our state-wide assessment.” She asks teachers if what they are doing is the best that they can do, specifically the best they can do for students. “If they say *no*, then they’re usually open to looking at ways they can do a better job at educating students.”

*Teacher Beliefs Sometimes Generate Resistance to Improvement Initiatives*

As Ed described kinds of changes (first and second order changes) inherent in organizational change, he explained that second order change, especially, sometimes spawns teacher resistance.

The distinction is that first order change is simply those changes that are incremental, that build on previous assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and can be easily incorporated into what a building does. A lot of quick fixes focus on that. We just need to do more of what we're doing. If we've been successful with this group of kids, let's just do more of it. That kind of thing.

Second order change requires that the person is not comfortable with the change. It requires either new skills, new training, or new insights into what the problem is all about. That is very uncomfortable for people, particularly people in buildings. Through the Meyers-Briggs research for example, we see that a lot of teachers, certainly not all, but an overwhelming number of teachers are sensing judgers, which is to say they prefer structure, routine, sequential ABCD kinds of changes. Second order change kind of disrupts that. They don't feel comfortable with that. They don't want to try anything because they might appear not to be successful, or not to be in charge, or not to be a master teacher. So they tend to fall back on first order change, thinking that that's what's going to get them out of the hole they're in. But it's got to be the second order change that really impacts systems.

Consultants reported that when teachers' beliefs fail to generate confidence in organizational change, they sometimes resist consultants' efforts to launch improvement initiatives. Eve explained,

You need to have them open up their mind and not to feel that change means failure. Change means new learning. Change means professional growth. If you can't get that scenario going, then all you get is constant resistance. And then that really makes the job very tough.

Eve tries to help teachers understand that change is not a negative, but "more of a growth potential." She reported, "I really speak to them and encourage them and massage them from that stance." She also places herself in a learning position alongside of teachers by modeling in their classrooms and inviting their critique. She begins slowly and encourages them to make changes that she knows will be easiest.

Eve portrays a view similar to educators who have gone before her. Writing about the moment that clients confront change, Bennis (1966) said, "Acceptance also depends on the relationship between the change-agent and the client-system: the more profound and anxiety producing the change, the more a collaborative and closer relationship is required" (p. 175). Davey (1971) cautions that although a partnership may "be perceived as a single conglomerate relationship...by the consultant" (p. 15), it actually consists of "several relationships between individual members and the consultant" (p. 15). According to Davey, consultants in Eve's position need to discern individual teacher and

administrator concerns, solidify separate relationships, and reassure clients individually when necessary.

Although Eve accepted responsibility for understanding teachers' resistance and helping them set it aside, she also held leadership accountable.

I'm going to say this really leads right back to the work I do with principals.

If there are resistant teachers in your school it's a leadership problem. I realize that very often principals don't bump up against resistant teachers because they don't want the hassle of writing them up and getting rid of them and finding someone new. It really is a leadership problem.

Sheryl reported that she has experienced teacher resistance while consulting, but that she has also been helped by staff members ameliorating resistance among their ranks.

They [teachers] might all show up because there's a mandate that they have to be there, but they are passive resistant about it. They don't follow through with it. In some cases they're outright hostile. If you push certain buttons with them, they will certainly become adversarial about it. I've never had saboteurs in a school. I've had those that won't engage. I've had some engage but have no intention of doing anything but status quo. And then I've had those that have engaged, have changed, have really had an impact and in some ways have influenced their colleagues more than I would have been able to because of the models they've become.

Ann reported that teacher resistance was not usually a significant problem for her. She believes that her deliberate habit of appearing to be in the school

merely to support teacher-led decisions, along with her practice of helping teachers be self-reflective helps to avoid resistance. As her work with clients proceeds, her recommendations and offers of support are given in response to their decisions, not in anticipation of those decisions. "Never does it come just strictly from me that this is what you need to do or this is what I feel you need. It's got to be based on some data." Ann did say, however, that resistance sometimes manifests itself and that she observes it in resisters' mannerisms or she hears about it from the improvement team. She notices that some teachers "don't get involved and kind of stay on the peripheral." Ann concluded, "As long as it's not sabotage, I think we can move forward. When it gets to the point where it gets to be sabotage, then that needs to be addressed."

*In addition to avoiding resistance by facilitating rather than leading decision making, Ann also diffuses resistance caused by inter-teacher fault finding.*

*In many of the schools that are high priority or are in need of transforming, there's a lot of fault finding—a lot of blaming. Nobody's taking responsibility. All the time is spent on trying to figure out who's responsible. So I get them to be self-reflective, to understand that okay this is who we feel is at fault, but we don't need to spend a lot of time on that because it's not productive. It's not going to help us get any closer to our goals. [I] help them get beyond the finger pointing—the blame game, help them see how counter-productive that is.*

When I asked Ann where she learned to help her clients in this way, she told me that she was the oldest of seven children and that she grew up trying to be the model child and play the role of mediator. She also explained that she once trained with Dr. Comer at Yale University. She learned that “we spend a lot of time trying to figure out who is at fault or not taking responsibility for what we can do to make things better.” She remembers it as “a wonderful experience,” even a kind of epiphany, because she learned to place a label on this phenomenon of group behavior so that now she can spot it quickly and help client teachers “be more serious about problem solving instead of having these discussions about who we feel is at fault.” Now she is better able to turn her clients toward productive collaboration.

Ann indicates that she experiences comparatively little teacher resistance. She doesn’t hear teachers saying that kids can’t learn. This might be partially explained by her job description. Until near the end of our interview series, her work with her state’s department of education was to oversee grant compliance and monitor model provider effectiveness. She once commented, “If schools are not progressing, they’re not really under my guidance. They’re under my guidance as far as overseeing the grant.”

Sheryl agreed with Ann that teacher resistance is not a major problem. Many of her client schools welcome her arrival and appear to believe they can do better and that, “it’s their responsibility to do better.” She did say, however, that out of 28 schools that she and her consultant staff were presently working with there were five with whom she was disappointed. These schools were serving

high poverty, minority populations, and teachers in these schools did not have high expectations for their students. She called teachers' adoption of low expectation for students "insidious racism." When that happens, Sheryl has to "push them on it" by helping them recognize stereotypes they may have accepted. She helps them understand that "just caring about kids of color or kids of poverty is not enough. There are schools out there that care about those kids, have high expectations for those kids, and support those expectations with good teaching." With laughter, Sheryl said she asks teachers, "Don't you want to be like them?"

Sheryl named excessive confidence as another reason why some clients resist consultant help, and she used one of her client schools as an example.

We have one elementary school that is not continuing with us. A lot of it is because they really believe that they're doing a great job. It's a K-2 building. I don't know that they are critical enough with one another to challenge each other. It's a very small, family kind of atmosphere—six or seven teachers in the school. And they were working harder than they wanted to work. They didn't like being pulled out of the classrooms to come to training. *We already know all this stuff.* The principal says they think they are better than they are.

Ed noted that in his consulting practice, teacher resistance had diminished in recent years due to No Child Left Behind. "Everybody knows about it. It's not going away. There are certain requirements, and...there's a tendency for people to listen. The passive-aggressive resistant kind of teacher—I see less



of that on these leadership forums than I used to years ago.” When he does run into teacher resistance, Ed confronts it head on.

I don’t let them off the hook. I don’t let them get away with, “We don’t have the time. We can’t do it. People don’t want to work with us,” etc. Now come on. I’ve been there. I know it’s hard work, but it can be done. I’ve changed schools in as short as six months, but it’s hard work. Don’t let anybody kid yourself about that. And likewise don’t try to kid me that things are so hard here that you can’t do it. Sure you can. Don’t con the con man. I know.

Throughout this section, we have heard the consultants describe client teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs. In the telling, we have also discerned respondents’ attitudes toward their clients’ behavior. “Attitudes are likes and dislikes. They are our affinities for and our aversions to situations, objects, persons, groups, or any other identifiable aspects of our environment” (Bem, 1970, p. 14). Bem explains that attitudes are outgrowths of values, cognition, and emotions. Rokeach (1976) situates attitude in action; that is, he says, “An attitude is a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner” (p. 112). Although Rokeach cautions that “not all writers agree that attitudes are predispositions...to respond” (p. 119), for the purpose of this report, I note that my consultants revealed attitudes spawned during close contact with client behavior. Due to the intermittent nature of their on-site presence, consultants must make the most of every hour in a client’s school. Discerning clients’ beliefs, interpreting behaviors,

encouraging movement, maintaining momentum—the constant demand for action suggests that consultants' attitudes do, at least, simmer just beneath their surface demeanor and fuel their performance.

### **Commendable Consultants Value Professional Learning Communities**

The third schooling factor characterized by consultants as influential to their consulting efficacy is professional learning communities (PLCs). When teachers form PLCs and meet together regularly, they garner opportunities for professional growth. Teachers bring to meetings samples of student work, assessments, and descriptions of resources and pedagogy engaged to teach specific lessons. During ensuing discussions, collegial teachers can constructively critique peers' teaching methods. Equally important, the team can consider specific student needs and direct their collective resources and expertise toward each need (Eaker, DuFour, and Bernette, 2002).

Heritage and Chen (2005) suggest that professional learning communities can fill a gap in teacher and administrator training. Data collection, analysis, and utilization are acknowledged to improve schools. "Yet the development of these skills has not been a part of most administrator preparation programs and hardly ever has been a feature of preservice or inservice teacher training" (p. 708). PLC sessions provide teachers opportunity to learn these and other new skills in a safe and trusted environment (Fairholm, 2000). As teachers and administrators regularly gather for the purpose of informing their work, the concept of steady improvement becomes deeply embedded as a school norm (Peterson and Deal,

1998). "While individual professionalism is desirable, active work in a professional group is also important to increasing teachers' sense of craft and their overall commitment to work contexts that are increasingly difficult and demanding" (Louis, Marks, and Kruse, (1996).

### *Professional Learning Communities Foster Systemic School Improvement*

In addition to serving as an incubator for nurturing best classroom methodology, PLCs also offer teachers and consultants ideal settings for fostering adoption of systemic school improvement initiatives. In this relatively small team-like setting, teachers can explore what school-wide change might mean to their group, their grade level, their classrooms (Danzig, Kilz, Szesc, Wiley, Osanloo, Gonzalez, Hunnicutt, Macey, and Boyle, 2004; DuFour, 2001). Peter Senge, well known strategist (Smith, 2001), has identified five disciplines that converge "to innovate learning organizations" (p. 3). At the top of his list is systems thinking, which Smith says allows members to "comprehend and address the whole" while examining "the interrelationship between the parts" (p. 4). Mintrop (2004) explains that even when teachers are informed about school needs while gathered in a single setting, they often do not see how school wide conditions should impact their individual teaching strategies. To effect systemic organization change, teachers must develop improvement initiatives together and practice teaching strategies among peers in a collegial manner. Although it certainly cannot be assumed that all PLC conversations promote consultants' efforts, this infrastructure does afford them congenial settings in which they might develop understanding and build trust toward proposed initiatives. "School

system leaders are wise to spend considerable time at the beginning of a reform initiative building an infrastructure that supports change over the long term” (Brown and Spangler, 2006).

Perhaps most importantly, the very presence of a professional learning community infrastructure in a school signals the respect that district and building leaders hold for teachers. When resources are allotted and time set aside for teachers to meet regularly, and especially when the PLC presence is announced to students and parents, teachers are recognized as learners and decision makers (Hansen, Gentry, and Dalley, 2003).

Ann referred to professional learning communities when she discussed the importance of teacher interaction. In her client schools she expects to see teachers interacting with each other. She explained that a learning community is “where teachers are working together, learning from each other, supporting each other, and modeling best practices for each other. So I do expect to see that.” When I asked Ann if the presence or absence of PLCs would affect her ability to make long-lasting change, she replied, “No, I would just view it as one school being further along than the other.” She went on to say, however, that she “strongly encourages” client schools without PLCs to develop them, because she wants clients to “take responsibility for their own learning even if they’re going to seek outside support from a consultant.” One reason that Ann wants clients to utilize PLCs is that they provide opportunity for teacher-led book studies.

You can get a lot of information from a great book. Sit down together in a professional learning community and see what information you can gain

that will support you in what you are trying to do. I think the more self-directed it is and the more responsibility the community can take themselves the more embedded it is and the more they benefit from it.

Ann considers the establishment of professional learning communities to be so critical that she says it needs to be on a must-do list for districts. She wants client teachers to have “some dialogue about curriculum, teaching for learning, and assessment. And if we [districts] don’t support teachers by providing an environment in which that can happen, it doesn’t happen.”

When Yvonne talked about professional learning communities, she emphasized the opportunity they provide for teachers to interact with principals. In fact, she said that the label PLC does not have great meaning for her unless she knows that in a client school it encompasses not just teacher interaction, but also principal-teacher dialogue.

What I like to see is a group of teachers with their principal who want to learn together, grow together, and make improvements together. A lot of times that means shared decision making. It means meeting together and looking at data and sharing in doing research, [finding] techniques or articles and sharing them and having discussion around those things, having them involved in some kind of planning and decision making.

That’s what it means to me.

When I asked Sheryl to explain why her consulting benefited by the professional learning community infrastructure within client schools, she talked about the way teachers grow professionally.

I guess it's explained by human nature and the fact that people by nature learn in social contexts for the most part. When they have opportunities to work in a collaborative, reflective manner around shared goals they will be more productive. They learn from one another. They get feedback for their own thinking. They inform their own thinking through structured dialogue. There's a sense of empowerment about group work that I think contributes to successful outcomes.

It was interesting to me to note that Sheryl also indicated that she valued the presence of professional learning communities in client schools because they mirror her consulting philosophy. She wants to deliver her expertise in an open discussion setting and model before teachers an interactive delivery style. "To go in and to just present content and practice on skills to large audiences would not be in my opinion be as effective as organizing and creating these structures of professional learning communities such as leadership teams." She also explained that if a client school already has PLCs established, she has an ideal access to small, homogenous teacher groups with whom she can work on specific aspects of the improvement initiative. She can assign goals or homework to be accomplished prior to the next meeting, and after duplicating this with several PLCs in a single building she can gather two or more together to compare notes and share information. Sheryl added that when her work with a client school is multi-faceted, the PLC structure allows her to accomplish one component with one group and another with a second group and so on. In that

case, she thinks of those small groups as sub-groups of the over-arching school-wide PLC.

Yvonne reported that the presence or absence of professional learning communities in client schools holds meaning beyond their use as vehicles of learning. Their presence signals to her a healthy culture of decision making shared among teachers and principals. On the other hand, "If it's not there, if you're not seeing any example of it, you've got a lot of work to do because that means perhaps that decision making is all being done by the principal." Yvonne explained further.

*I mean what is it telling you if that isn't there? Is it that they aren't ready? Is it happening in a different way, in an informal way, not a real structured way? Certainly you want to see an open communication between the principal and the staff and shared decision making and even some nurturing within the staff to have the ability to make recommendations and take on responsibility and lead like a subcommittee so that the principal doesn't do all the work and hand down this information so that the staff just sits back and doesn't buy into it.*

*Sheryl also linked professional learning communities to school culture, saying that one skilled teacher working behind her classroom door cannot greatly impact her school. "Ability to improve her school depends on a more collegial type of environment" where strong teacher leaders can help others examine research and share best practices with one another.*

### ***Professional Learning Community Challenges***

No consultant whom I interviewed suggested that professional learning communities do not present challenges. When Ed talked about professional learning communities he noted that even in schools where the staff want to establish them, it isn't easy. Time is an issue. "There are so many demands on their time. After school activities, the demands of their students..." This brought Ed back to the matter of adequate central office support. He said central office staff need to "realize that there are some things they could do." Central office could restructure time use and sell the PLC concept to the community so that parents understand why teachers are leaving their classrooms to attend meetings. Ed is also concerned that without this structured district level promotion, PLC set-aside time might fade into teachers' personal make-up time.

Eve commented, "I think the concept is a wonderful concept and I truly believe in it. It's not always easy to implement, and that again is the power of a consultant." She explained further that consultants can support principals and teachers by helping them find ways to form productive PLCs. Like Ed, Eve also talked about time, calling it something to be battled with, and she added that when working with time issues, unions can be a factor.

Discussion of professional learning communities brought Eve back to the leadership issue. She said she was speaking from first hand knowledge, having observed teacher groups in action. "I've seen it happen that when teachers come together and pool their knowledge without having someone feed that knowledge, it comes to a dead end. It doesn't go beyond what people bring to the table." Eve believes that teachers often need leaders' help to learn how to analyze student



work and to determine how instruction needs to be adjusted. While looking at unsatisfactory student work, they may drift into a “gripe session” rather than knowledgeably addressing best practices. “The whole process needs to be supported by someone else who’s extremely knowledgeable.” The leader’s role might be to supply that best practice knowledge, or her role might be to hire a skilled consultant. Either way, Eve feels that PLC effectiveness rests in the hands of strong leaders.

Professional learning communities are not always operational in consultants’ client schools. Yvonne talked about their absence in high priority schools where she most frequently consults.

What do you suppose is happening? They’re not doing professional learning communities. They’re real dysfunctional usually. So you’re not always seeing it. And you have to get down to—all right what’s the problem? Is the problem mediocre teaching staff? They’ve kind of burned out or they’re not real qualified or highly trained? Are we seeing a poor example of a principal who doesn’t know how to lead and doesn’t understand what’s important in his or her building? I’ve seen it all.

### Closing

In this chapter I’ve reported that consultants identified three overarching factors that impact their ability to effect long lasting school improvement: district and building level leadership, teachers’ beliefs, and professional learning communities. A correlating theme threaded through this chapter is that

commendable consultants take their client schools as they find them. They adjust to each situation and persevere toward their goal of helping students learn.

In the next chapter, I examine various roles that my study participants step into in their determination to fulfill their side of their consultant-school partnerships.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLES PLAYED BY COMMENDABLE CONSULTANTS

In this chapter I report on commendable consultants' responses when questioned about roles they play in order to serve client schools with whom they partner. The consultants first tell how and when they determine which role(s) to play, which leads to a discussion of the influence that contracts have upon their freedom to choose. Next they identify their preferred roles and in so doing reveal multiple choices. Then I report respondents' stated preferences for role flexibility versus consistency. In closing, I discuss Dawson's (2000) assertion that consultants can add value to clients' knowledge base by skillfully playing appropriate roles

As the commendable consultants whom I studied named roles they choose to play, they revealed aspects of their self-identity. Franchi and Swart (2003) credit Erickson (1968) with explaining that identity is "that uncanny subjective sense of *sameness and continuity*, of being whole, separate and unique" (p. 19), which Franchi and Swart say is made possible through a person's "awareness of an embodied, unfolding, innermost private life" (p. 152). Franchi and Swart explain further that each individual identity is actually an "identity structure" framed by inter-related, multiple identities (p. 152). This identity structure is complex and ever changing as a person "perceives and acts" (p. 153). Similarly, we will see that the interviewees seem to structure their professional identities through multiple, inter-related roles which they refine in response to perceived client needs.

Owens (2003) proposes that personal identity is very much linked to role-identity, a term he discusses in the context of work by McCall and Simmons (1966), defining role-identity as “the character and the role that individuals devise for themselves when occupying specific social positions” (Owens, 2003, p. 216). A person thinks of a position and imaginatively places himself there. From this view, he or she determines how a person in that position acts and thereby creates his own action plan. From this self-situation, the individual then measures himself as a role performer and if necessary makes adjustments. “All of this adds up to a view of people capable of creativity and improvisation in the performance of their roles yet still guided by the overall requirements of their social position” (p. 216).

The commendable consultants whom I interviewed freely chose the roles they said they played for clients. They implied that if anything dictated their role choice, it was the client school’s condition and need. Even within particular school need boundaries they, for the most part, were still free to determine which role was the best match and step into it. One exception was explained by Yvonne in Chapter 4. She complained that her state’s department of education sometimes pushes her consultant colleagues into “generalist functions,” occasionally requiring them to play roles with which they are not comfortable. However, while describing the effect of this policy on colleagues, she did not include herself. When Yvonne needed to be urged into an uncomfortable role, she appeared to do this to herself. One evening after listening to her deliver a ringing challenge to district administrators, board members, and parents to shape

up their schools for kids' sake, I was astonished as we walked to our cars to hear the tone of worry in her voice as she voiced dread of facing their ire in follow-up meetings. Nevertheless, she was determined to see the matter through and prepared to fulfill whatever role proved necessary.

As I observed my subjects during interviews and shadowings and later replayed interview tapes, I occasionally wondered where their real selves were located—in the roles they fulfilled as consultants or in so called down times between engagements. However, Burr (2002) says that distinguishing between role and self is not useful, because ideally a person carries aspects of himself into a role. He suggests that people become what a role demands of them and proposes, for example, that it might be more accurate to say women are nurturing because they have so many opportunities to provide care, rather than they provide care because they are naturally nurturing. He concludes, "You are what you do" (p. 64). My interviewed consultants seemed to hold well-developed conceptions of roles they play during interactions with clients. They were able to tell what they do as say a facilitator or coach. One question remains—were my subjects revealing their real selves or different role-playing selves while I interviewed and shadowed them? After studying my notes, replaying interview tapes, and recalling their behaviors, I cannot say that I know. However, I return to the original purpose for this research, which was to investigate K-12 school consultants' perceptions of schooling and consulting methods best suited to supporting school reform. Not knowing whether or not my subjects were able to fully separate their selves from their roles, not knowing whether they spoke out of

self-identity or role-identity does not weaken my faith that they delivered their honest perceptions of consulting partnerships and, thus, contributed meaningfully to this research.

In the following section, consultants explain how and when they choose roles to play in service to clients.

### Consultants Choose Roles

I asked interviewees to talk about the process by which they choose roles they play as consultants. In their telling, they spoke about timing; that is, determining when to make role choices, and they talked about information gathering; in other words, allowing truths about client schools to dictate role choice.

#### *Consultants Choose Roles Prior to Initial Contacts by Client Schools*

Eve said that her roles were developed prior to consulting while she was a central office administrator. Today, her decision is less about which of several roles she might choose and more about whether the caller's request fits her established role set.

Normally people contact me, and when they contact me they tell me why they're contacting me and why they want me to come and support them. So at that point in time—it might be from the district level, it might be from the state level, it might be from the organization that was hired to support the system—but from that point in time, I usually do make the decision as

to whether I think this is something I can do. I'll generally know whether or not I'll accept the assignment.

Eve has learned that if her initial contact comes from district personnel, she cannot assume building level enthusiasm for her presence. "Very often if it's imposed from the district level, it's a little tougher kind of scenario because they [principals] may not necessarily see themselves as needing help or support." In that case she must immediately step into dual roles with one being an empathizing, trust builder role. This role lasts until the building's principal and teachers fully accept her presence and unfolds simultaneously with her other role(s). On the other hand, "if it [the request] comes from the school itself, the principal has already bought into it to a degree, and what I try to do is help the principal build a belief system in the school so that teachers begin to see themselves as learners."

#### *Consultants Choose Roles during Early Conversations with Client School Leadership*

Ed and Sheryl said their roles are chosen very early, often during their first conversation with a potential client school, but Ed added, "Now, if in the course of doing that it appears there are other issues and things that I can't do, then I'm certainly free to bring that up, as are they." Sheryl explained why she is able to choose a role so quickly.

I'm real quick to establish relationships. I would say if not during my first session with the primary stakeholders that I'm consulting with, at least by my second session. The fact that they usually come seeking help is an

indication that they have some prior knowledge either of me personally and the work that I've done in the state, or committees I've served on with them, or my reputation. Or more likely because there's an alignment with their philosophy and what they've heard about [the model for which she works].

Sheryl commented that when people contact her because they know her reputation and her model, she comfortably assumes that roles familiar to her will meet their needs.

When I asked Eve how she refines her favored role to suit a particular building (rather than a district), she explained that she is guided by information she gleans about buildings during pre-conversations with district personnel.

It depends on what the prep was before that, because you're talking specifically school level. Normally before I go into a school level I've had lots of conversations with people at the district level or with the organization that hired me, or hopefully with the people that I'm going to meet. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't like to go in blind. In those conversations, I get a feel for what people value, what they are sensitive about, because you don't want to start off on the wrong foot. You try to have pre-conversations so that you go in as a consultant with a focus in mind.

### *Consultants Choose Roles through Data Analysis*

Ann delays choosing her role until she is convinced that she knows exactly what a new client school needs. Because that original diagnosis will mold



her partnership with the staff, she is determined that it be based on data rather than opinions held by the school's contact person.

I want some data. I want to have data to support any suggestions or recommendations I might make in collaboration with a school team. And so what I might do is ask them to share with me what kind of data they collect. I might talk about the four types of data we encourage all schools to have, and if they don't have perception data, ask them how they feel about perception data and how people feel about their school and what do they have to support their thinking. And if they don't have data, then [I] work with them on perhaps developing some surveys or some other tools that they could use to get some perception data. I think they need to identify any issue as indeed based on some data and then [I] work with them to develop some strategies to address it. But I like to see it come from them [and] help them own the decision.

Ann's insistence upon allowing data to determine her clients' needs coincides with Davey's (1971) point that client organizations hold a responsibility equal to that of consultants for launching partnerships with accurate information. Davey says the organization should identify its needs and goals and share them with the consultant before a formal partnering agreement is reached. He says, furthermore, that the organization should be able to describe its expected outcomes from the partnership at this early stage. He urges organizations to give consultants free access to its personnel and data so no unnecessary barriers skew the consultants' early understanding of the situation. One or more

organization members should be designated as the consultant's contact person(s) through whom the consultant can obtain quick access to data as needed. Davey offers his advice "as a useful framework for the development of an organization-consultant relationship which will result in a high level of effectiveness of the ensuing collaborative effort" (p. 154).

#### **Consultants Choose Roles through Research and Former Experience**

When Sheryl considers how she might help a new client school, she turns to her past experience and training.

I think my nature and the work that I did as a central office administrator during the latter half of my career in public education also guide me. I had an opportunity during my work as a central office administrator in the early nineties to be part of a state wide and national restructuring we called it at that time. We had a small federal grant. We were able to attend some national conferences and bring in high level school reform people at that time—a lot of the folks that were surfacing in the late eighties, early nineties. I think that process and those conversations—all of those things contributed probably to my approach.

#### ***Consultants Consider Contractual Effects upon Their Role Choice***

I asked the five participants how much effect contracts with client schools have upon their role choice. I wanted to know if contracts limit their choices and if contracts ever push them into roles they would prefer not to play. In discussing the effect that contracts have upon them, consultants' responses varied from "none," to "some," to "a lot."

*Contracts do not affect Ed and Ann.*

Ed's response was the most surprising, especially since his work ranges over national, state, district, and building levels. I asked, "How much effect does contractual language have upon your role choice, and do you find it restrictive?"

He said, "To tell you the truth, most of my work is done with a handshake and word of mouth. Maybe out of the hundreds of occasions in the last five years, I've maybe signed one contract."

I wasn't expecting that response. "That surprises me. You don't feel limited in that way?"

"Not at all."

I wanted to understand this further. "Then in the original conversation that you have with whoever hires you, do they tell you what they want you to do? Is that explored at all?"

Ed explained, "To a certain extent. Generally people know who I am. They've either heard or they've seen me work before and so they will ask if I'm available. That's always the first question. "We've got this problem or this series of meetings. Are you available? Can you help us?" For example I did a year's worth of work last year in a large district helping them figure out how to get through their budget mess. I worked with central office, with the building principals, with the school board. I actually did three school board retreats, and I did all that work without a contract."

"I did not know that even happened anymore."

"Oh, yeah."

Ann does work with contracts, but she avoids undue control by carefully framing their language so they don't hinder her freedom of role choice. During an interview I asked, "Does contractual language ever affect the role that you play?"

Ann hesitated, "No, I don't think so, because we try to iron out that contract so it is mutually agreeable to all parties before anything is signed. We have to sit down and agree on the terms of the contract."

I wondered, "So the contract never limits whom you can talk to, where you can walk around the building, whom you can see? You never feel limited?"

Ann explained, "No I haven't because if that's something I'm required to do, that would be stipulated in the contract that I would need access to classrooms for walk-throughs or opportunities to interview teachers. Or if I need to interview students, that would all be part of my contract. I think I give enough attention to the contract initially, working that piece out so that I don't have those kinds of concerns."

"In your experience, are you finding it quite easy or difficult to get things into the contract?" I asked.

"The contracts that I've signed? It's not been a huge challenge. I can't think of an instance where that would be the case," she responded.

"How did you learn how to negotiate a contract?"

"I think just from over 31 years as an educator and a member of school improvement teams, being a curriculum coordinator, and doing the professional development piece, trying to work out all of those pieces with consultants that were coming in. It was trial and error I think."

*Contracts affect Yvonne and Sheryl somewhat.*

Both Yvonne and Sheryl are always cognizant of client staff union contracts, as well as those they enter into with their client districts, but neither feels terribly restricted by them. I asked Yvonne, "How much effect do contracts and contractual language have upon the roles you can play?"

Yvonne explained, "In our state, especially, you have to really pay attention to that sort of thing. Having been a personnel director, I'm very sensitive to what contract restrictions are. Personally I don't find that as a problem. Now some people use that as an excuse. I've always believed that whether the superintendent and others like it or not, I need as a consultant to get acquainted with the union leadership so they understand what I see my role as. I'm not there to bust their union or violate their contracts. So you have to show some respect for that agreement or contracts that were made between the district and the staff and you work around them. You try to work within those parameters. And I'm going to be honest with you. To date, I haven't found anything that impossible to work around. I like to keep the union president informed about anything I'm doing, so when I send memos out I make sure he gets one, so he knows what I've got planned."

I inquired, "Do you feel quite free to choose whatever method you want, or do you ever feel restricted by contractual language?"

Yvonne responded, "The only time I feel a little restricted is when I'm working under the auspices of the Department of Ed. You can't just go out and do whatever you feel like, and you can't say whatever you think. You are

representing the Department of Ed so you have to be careful. So you're not as free to do whatever you want to, but you do have a lot of latitude. I'm much more free in what I want to say and how I want to do it when I'm hired as a private consultant."

Sheryl's story was similar when I inquired, "Sheryl, how much effect do contracts have upon the roles you can play?"

She replied, "When we're at the school site unless there is a real die-hard union individual at the site and a really odd contract, we really don't find contractual things all that difficult."

"Do you ever feel that your methods are dictated by the language in the contract that you signed?" I asked.

Sheryl answered, "No, not really. The contract is developed to be so coherent with our philosophy and our theory of change. That's more what I keep in mind rather than the contract. If I end up having to go to one school and they get more days of service than another school but they've been very engaged in very genuine ways, there's no way that I would say that's all the days we're going to invest in this school. That's all we're getting paid for. I mean if it takes an extra effort in some instances and we have the staff resources to do that, then I would be making that extra effort."

*Contracts do affect Eve.*

Among the five consultants interviewed, Eve gave the greatest importance to contracts, indicating that they clearly define her agreements. "How much affect do contracts have upon the role you can play?" I asked.

Eve responded, "It has a lot because contract defines my time, and it also defines what the people's expectations are of me. For example, I just started with an organization that has basically built in 25 days. In this particular thing I'm responsible for three directors, but each of those directors has 12 consultants. So that's over 39-40 people. 25 days to me is not a lot of time if you're really going to reach all of those constituents, but of course my role is to reach them through the directors as much as possible.

"It depends. In a state where I've worked recently, for example, this particular year is the third year of the contract. I have seven days in the schools. Seven days is a drop in the bucket. It's really nothing. Of course, I've worked there three years, so it's a compilation of time. The first year I think I was there an average of once a month which is probably 10 or 12 days give or take a little. And I could organize those days, maybe go two times in one month and not go another or something like that. But yes, the budget that influences the contract defines my time, and sometimes I really feel pinched concerning the work that needs to be done."

"Are your methods ever specifically dictated by contract language?" I inquired.

Eve explained, "Yes, there are some cases where they are. In a recent case, basically I was on my own. A state level education leader hired me because he knew the work I can do. I'm working now for two organizations and also for another state. They all have a little different process. They have their own infrastructure. I usually tell them this is basically how I work. Does that fit

within your parameters? Sometimes the limitations come because people want to nickel and dime you. If you're there for five hours, they want to pay you for three. You might be there for five hours and have three hours of planning before you got there. They only want to pay you for the time you are in the building, that kind of stuff. That's what I bump into more than anything else, how they organize their invoice process. For example, right now I'm doing planning for a 3 hour session with a group of consultants and directors that I'm working with in schools, but that 3 hour delivery session is taking me five hours in preparation. But sometimes they see you are in the building for this many hours and that's what they're going to pay you for. So I try and negotiate all of that."

"When you do that negotiating, do you describe to them your at home hours?" I wondered.

Eve concluded, "Yes, I do. I explain it to them and describe it to them and send to them documentation, agendas, articles that I might have researched, templates that I might have developed for their session. I send them all the documentation. Generally I haven't had a problem. They usually agree. That's one of the benefits of being retired."

Eve laughed and continued, "I have a pension. I don't have to consult. If they push my buttons too far, I more or less say I'm really sorry that we can't agree on this. I don't normally have a problem."

Literature written to advise professional consultants often takes a more rigid stance toward contracts than did most of my study's participants (Block, 1985; Block, 2000; Bond, 1997; Cockman, Evans, and Reynolds, 1996; Holz and



Zahn, 2004). Cockman et al. state, "We cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of full and open discussion during the contracting phase" (p. 103). They caution that even a client's eagerness to jump to problem solving should not deter the consultant from careful prior dialogue involving every aspect of the pending partnership. Holtz and Zahn make the point, as did Ed, that contracts are not necessarily written. "The agreement between the consultant and the client is a contract, even if it is only verbal. Verbal contracts are perfectly valid and binding" (p. 233). They do, however, recommend that agreements be written since the process helps both parties clarify their understanding, and a written document is, of course, useful in case of a dispute. When Ed told me that he always functioned with only a verbal agreement, he did imply that he considers them to be binding. For him verbal agreements have been sufficient. Block (2000) agrees that contracts may be verbal only, but he notes that those between clients and external consultants are usually written. Regardless of whether the agreement is written or verbal, he considers contracting a skill, because it requires ability to "negotiate wants, cope with mixed motivation, surface concerns about exposure and loss of control, and clarify all parties to the contract" (p. 58).

Schein (1999) offers an alternative view of contracts, suggesting that neither clients nor consultants know each other well enough early in their relationship to create a contract and that contracting should be replaced by the process of exploring "mutual expectations" (p. 36) as a means of bringing hidden expectations to the surface. He believes that client-consultant relationships are far less damaged by disappointment when implicit expectations are dashed than

when a contract is broken. Schein does caution, however, that this approach is helpful only when feelings of disappointment are “treated as a normal process of relationship building and as a further source of insight and learning” (p. 37). Both parties need to attempt to identify their personal hopes for the partnership and to be sensitive to those of each other.

Boud (1981) agrees that partners to a consulting relationship need to reveal their expectations for the partnership. “Unexpressed and unexplored expectations...can be very destructive in the later stages of consultation” (p. 17). He places so much importance on such hopes that he thinks of them as an unwritten contract that needs to be expressed in an “open, explicit agreement” (p. 17) similar to Schein’s (1999). Oliver (2005) grasps both Schein’s and Boud’s meaning. She writes, “Patterns of feeling, meaning and action that we, and others, are experiencing in a relational system [are] central to effective organizational development” (p. 3). Without mentioning *contract*, she suggests that clients and consultants make conscious choices about how they will think and behave and then not only be responsible, but also accountable for those choices. In a similar vein Weinberg (1985) reminds readers that contracts do not automatically create trust; neither do they replace trust between consultants and clients. In fact, he concludes, “Trust without a contract is infinitely better than a contract without trust” (p. 204).

In the following section, we hear the consultants identify roles they normally fulfill when advising client schools. When I reached the point during the third interview round where I asked each participant what consulting roles he or

she plays, in most cases I detected some hesitancy. In fact, with all of the interviewees, their third interviews in the 4-interview series—those devoted to role playing—were the briefest. Giving themselves titles did not sound comfortable to the respondents. They seemed to prefer talking about what they do, rather than what they are. Nevertheless, they all gathered their thoughts and by ruminating about their work identified roles they play. No consultant settled upon only one role.

### Consultants Describe Multiple Roles

In response to my question, “What role or roles do you believe you should play when called to a school to consult?” my interviewees provided varied descriptions of what they do, all of which fit under the overarching theme of helper. No respondent chose role names with more directive connotations such as change agent or turn around specialist. Even when Yvonne talked about her compliance monitor role, she emphasized the helping aspect.

Roles identified by these commendable consultants are grouped into six categories: (1) observer and diagnostician; (2) facilitator, helper, guide on the side; (3) coach, mentor, trainer, encourager; (4) compliance monitor; (5) modeler; and (6) off-site service provider.

#### *Observer and Diagnostician*

Yvonne, Ed, Ann, and Eve all depicted themselves as observers and diagnosticians, emphasizing the importance of stepping into this role very early in the partnership. Ann considered her observer role crucial since the position she

held with her state's department of education required her to make sure that schools and model providers were collaborating productively. She was careful to be present often when providers were in buildings or hosting regional multi-school sessions. She was there to "see what was going on with the model provider."

Eve's impetus for choosing the observer role was timing. Although she knew that improvement might stretch over months or years, she first searched for a need that could be addressed quickly so as to make an immediate impact on her client staff and, thus, build confidence in the total improvement initiative.

As a consultant I will have to pick one particular thing that will help them become successful immediately or as quickly as possible while I'm putting all these parts together and moving them in a direction that really makes sense. It's a challenging role to play and that's why I think a person has to come from a place with a lot of experience. You have to draw on all of that to make this happen.

Ed views himself as a diagnostician, capable of helping clients "figure out what to do," as does Yvonne who values her ability to observe and diagnose objectively.

Number one, you have to have objective eyes and be the one who will have no vested interest and will speak the truth. A lot of times people will make all kinds of excuses when they are too close to a situation and also when they're trying to avoid any responsibility for what's been going on.

So someone has to say what's been happening and bring out the truth. So I see that as an important thing.

That involves diagnosis. You have to have enough experience and expertise that you can recognize when things aren't the way they should be. In the school district that might come from looking at the Baldrige work (Baldrige, n.d.). We have many research-based diagnostic tools that we use. What should be happening in an effective school? What's happening in this school? Does it match or are they way off? So having some diagnostic tools helps.

And you are coming forward and telling them what you see happening as an outside observer, which they may summarily disregard (laughter). They don't have to believe you. So I think that's one of the important roles that you have to play. You've got to go in there and see and hear and have something to judge it against and then share what your findings are. That's like the first step.

#### *Facilitator, Helper, and Guide on the Side*

The consultants whom I studied move quickly beyond observing and diagnosing to facilitating, helping, and guiding. In these three roles, they help clients develop leadership and problem solving skills. They emphasized that they do not want to make decisions for teachers and administrators and that their goal is to prepare clients for the day when the partnership ends. Ann begins,

The role I think I should play is one of being perhaps like a guide on the side. I like to use that expression. Hopefully guiding them to have some

conversations about how I can assist them, how I can support, and then doing whatever research is necessary to provide that support to them. I really encourage people to set their own agenda as far as support they need and professional development. So I just kind of guide them as far as the conversations they have and being as reflective as possible and helping them with that.

At first Sheryl seemed taken aback when asked to identify the roles she plays, but then she enthusiastically dove in.

Oh, goodness! I really see myself in a role as someone to just facilitate the thinking of the group, to give them some processes for collecting and analyzing the data, helping them frame questions around the issues that they are trying to grapple with, guide them to resources that might be helpful for them to examine. I think it's just to help them organize in some ways the context and the problems that they are trying to sort out.

We believe that people construct their own meaning and that's how they gain new knowledge and skills. That just to tell people this is what you should do and how you should do it is not as powerful a learning experience as for people to discover what they need to know and what's the best way to apply it.

Ed thinks of himself largely as a helper.

I think philosophically I ascribe to Ed Schein's philosophy of consultation, that I'm there to help. So I don't go in as an expert or as someone who is there with a great deal of expertise to tell them what to do. It's more to

help them figure out what they need to do and how they can do it. So my philosophy is one of going in as a helper.

*Coach, Mentor, Trainer, Encourager*

Some interviewed consultants said one of their chosen roles is that of coach, or mentor, or trainer, and Eve especially wants to be an encourager.

I'm not there to tell them what they've been doing wrong, because they already know that they're not succeeding. What I'm there to do is to give them a glimmer of hope and a glimmer of a path to more success. And I don't want to shut that down. So you're really a good listener for most of the time and a good talker so that you can create some common ground in which you agree to move forward.

Yvonne coaches for the purpose of preparing a local staff member to replace her and eventually become an in-house version of an external consultant.

This district that I'm working in now, they want to keep me on for the third year as long as they have the funding. There is one person who's going to take up the reins for a lot of the issues that I was put in there to get back in place. My goal is to build the capacity of this person, to have all of the mechanisms in place so these things will continue. I can see in this case, if I'm not there backing her up and asserting myself from time to time and supporting what she's trying to do in her program, there are people who would run her right over.

I asked Sheryl if she considers herself a teacher. In answering, she continues the theme that coaching involves equipping clients to function independently.

Probably, or at least a coach in the sense that because we have such a constructivist approach, hopefully it's not direct instruction or direct teaching, but it's providing them with opportunities to kind of discover for themselves what works for them. It is providing them with tools and strategies. We all try to do it in a way that gives them some voice and choice as far as what works for them. We definitely don't want to set ourselves up as experts.

Eve steps one level back from direct teacher training and becomes a coach to coaches. She develops capacity in building-level leaders to mentor their peers.

A lot of people already have coaches identified or staff developers already identified in their building. They call it a professional development team or a leadership team. They have different names for them. Once I talk with them and see them in operation, then I narrow down with them a goal and a plan of action. In rolling out that plan, I may play several different roles. Part of it may be really moving that plan. Part of it may be coaching the administrator in becoming a better instructional leader and at the same time coaching the people who are responsible for supporting staff and their learning.

I rarely at this point in time go into a classroom and do a model lesson. I will work with coaches who need to do that. I will observe coaches and give them feedback. I will observe lessons with coaches who are coaching people, and together we'll talk about it and form next steps. If I need to do a workshop of some sort and some knowledge building for folks, I'll do



that. But I really don't step into classrooms and do the modeling. I will have conversations with teachers if that's what they want me to do mostly as a model for the coach—how you have a conversation—because my goal is not to have them rely on me but to begin to rely on themselves.

I asked Eve if she views herself essentially as a trainer of leaders, and she replied,

Basically, and those leaders can be anywhere from the district level down to whoever is considered to be a leader in the school other than the principal if there's a professional team in the school. I do a lot of the leadership pieces. And leadership involves thinking about scheduling, thinking about organizing for professional development, and building the capacity for persons to function as leaders in the schools.

One evening while at home Yvonne began to reflect on the gratitude she receives from clients in response to her encouraging words.

Just yesterday I got a call from one of my districts that has a lot of new people in it who aren't quite sure how to do this job with Title I and some of these grants that we oversee, and I could tell by the sound in the message he had left on my office voice mail that he was a little tense, a little nervous. I called him back within a couple of hours. I was able to get right back to him. And what comes out of his mouth but he says, "Oh, Yvonne, your voice is so soothing. I can't tell you how whenever I know you're on the other end of the line; everything is going to be okay. We're going to get it figured out. You're going to be able to explain how it should

be done, and everything is going to be okay.” I really....that’s what makes the job great when you know you’ve helped people. Despite my frustrations with some of my high priority schools, you do with certain individuals get that “thank you” and “boy, we sure needed you to guide us. I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t been here to help us understand.” So that’s what keeps you going.

#### *Grant Compliance Monitor*

Because Ann and Yvonne work part-time for a state department of education, some of their roles are distinct from the others’. They are charged with monitoring schools’ compliance with grant regulations. They don’t see this necessarily as being judgmental. Even in this role, they emphasize their opportunity to help. Ann explains,

They’ve got to own it. That’s key. And what we may do at that point is say, “Okay, we’re going to require that you address these issues. Based on data and our observations, these seem to be key issues that may be hampering you from being the best school that you can. And we’re going to require you to make a plan about how you are going to address these issues.” And we will make some recommendations that they don’t have to take, but many times they will take some. And we provide them with resources. I don’t mean money but resources as far as assistance with implementation of any of these strategies should they decide that’s the way they want to go. Kind of a monitoring piece for me.

I reminded Ann that during our first interview she told me that she doesn't always see what she hopes to when she visits schools, and that she had commented, "When I don't, then it becomes problematic." I asked her to speak about the degree of freedom she enjoys or restrictions that limit the role she plays in such problematic situations. She replied,

Well, it makes it necessary for me to decide how I can [hesitation] share information based on observations and again utilizing data that won't be— hopefully won't be interpreted as here's somebody coming in again just to criticize but information gathering to help them accomplish the goals they've set forth.

I asked if at that point she takes on something of the role of policeman.

"Again, I'm monitoring. And I go visit schools with that purpose to see if they have done what they laid out in their application and their reports that they would do. So I think I'm there as a monitor."

I then said, "In our conversation today as you have described your roles, there are some words that you have chosen not to use. I can think of teacher, mentor. Is there any particular reason why you leave those words out when you describe your role?" Ann responded,

Because as the coordinator, monitor, I have 88 schools I worked with this year and they are implementing somewhere from 30 to 40 different model providers. They are able to hire—they pay a model provider to do that. My primary role has been to go in [when] they've needed some support with some state piece. They've needed assistance with some issue they've

had with their model provider. I would help with that. If they needed some support in addition to what the model provider was giving, I would assist with that.

At the time of this interview, Ann was about to transition into a new position with her state's department of education. Speaking of her former job she said, "I will not say I did not mentor because that was some of what I did, but that was not my primary role. We provided, hopefully, resources for that. The model provider was getting paid to do that."

Yvonne's monitor role also was a feature of her part-time department of education position and involved district applications for federal dollars.

We don't write their grants for them. We read them and approve them.

But a lot of times you'll have districts or new people come into a district for Title One or one of these programs or we have a district that wants to revamp one of their programs. Then they call us many times and ask us to come on in and advise them and see what their plan is and see if it's going to be in compliance right at the beginning stages before they even submit the grant. Now you have to understand these are not competitive grants. They're allocations. If it was competitive grants and the Department of Ed was going to be part of it, I could not go in and tell them how to write their grant.

One morning I shadowed Yvonne as she conducted a workshop to teach administrators and central office staff persons how to properly apply for federal grant dollars. Standing before approximately 100 people, her demeanor said, "I

have something important to say.” She carefully explained each handout component, introduced team members who would also be presenting, and launched into the first session. She spoke articulately, clarifying points about grant compliance with real-life examples from her consulting practice. Later while others presented, she interjected detailed explanations when necessary. As her opening session ended and a team member took over, Yvonne walked out into the hall where I could see her talking with a third team member. Much later, as she approached the microphone to do the final session, I overheard this same man offer to close the workshop for her. She declined and finished as strongly as she had begun. Later, I asked her about those behind-the-scenes conversations with the team member. She explained that she had a severe migraine and was trying to reach her husband so that he could take her home. Unable to, she completed all of her obligations with no one but her teammates aware that she was ill.

### *Process Modeler*

Whether he intended to model or not, Ed was aware that he modeled for school leaders whenever he consulted in their buildings.

You know one of Schein’s principles is that everything you do is an intervention. (He’s referring to Edgar Schein, 1999.) So how you speak to people, how you respond to an aggressive teacher or an angry parent or anyone, obviously that is modeling. People are watching what you do.

That’s inherent in what we do. You can’t get away from that. People are watching you and they watch to see if there is a degree of transparency. So

if you help them set group norms about listening and respecting each other and I interrupt people or I cut them off or I get argumentative, then that's obviously not walking the talk.

Ann's modeling role evolves as she and colleagues show districts how to launch school improvement by first defining their issues.

At the state level we have gone in and done on-sites where we say okay this is what we need to do. We go in with a team of consultants, and we put together a process for getting at data about how the school systems are operating and then work along with them in those areas that really need to be examined. And we work with them through that process step by step. But again based on hard data—not just on what we feel or what we think we saw even though we share that.

#### *Off-site Service Provider*

In varied ways, all five consultants indicated that they fulfill a role for client schools when they are off site, that is, not actually in school buildings. I call this role off-site service provider. Following are excerpts from their responses when I asked about this role.

Ann –

- There's just a lot. But whatever I'm doing, I'm doing it in support of those schools. It's endless.
- Sometimes they need a national expert in a particular area. And if they don't know of someone, I do know of quite a few or I have access to that

information and can get that information to them so that they can make a selection.

- I'm very often in touch with the federal government, going through the guidance, handling legislative matters.
- After I've done a site visit, comparing my pre-visit information, filling out a follow-up letter, sharing what I've observed and the grant information, and making some recommendations.
- Based on my findings as I make site visits, I'll plan some professional development for them.
- Troubleshooting for our schools and the model providers. Sometimes there might be issues with model providers—handling that.

Ed –

- Sometimes I'm asked to do research to figure out something for them to do.
- Obviously I'm acting on their behalf when I'm getting materials or a design or a training design or an intervention that's still in my mind.

Sheryl –

- I do a lot of thinking (chuckle) about what needs to be done. I do research. I organize agendas. I prepare tools and documents.
- I did an analysis of documents that were given to me by personnel at a client school and plugged the data that I could extract from those documents into appropriate charts and matrices as part of being able to organize the information in a way that would be helpful so that the school

improvement team and the staff would be able to look at that information and identify what the implications would be and make some recommendations from that.

- I look to where there are gaps in schools' data and help them figure out what questions they should be asking to complete the data collection and analysis, of whom they should be asking those questions, and just trying to organize their thinking and their actions. There is a lot of prep work.
- Then I'm always collecting information at meetings with clients and getting input and ideas. And then I bring that home and update the materials that I'm using with them and get it back out to them. So there is always that continuous refinement of their ideas, adding to their ideas that I think is important to keep the process moving forward.

Sheryl explained that she and those who work with her fulfill this role from home offices. "There's no point in wasting time working out of other offices when we have offices in our homes. This way we can work 24/7. It might be that something is coming up during the day and we need to take care of personal kinds of things. But then we might be sending emails back and forth to each other on Saturday and Sunday and so whatever it takes to get it done.

Eve –

- There's a lot of emailing that goes on, a lot of phone conversations. There is a lot of prep work if I need to find particular books for clients to be reading, or video tapes, or things that I want to either bring with me or



share with them. Yeah, there's a lot of that kind of thing, especially if I'm here and my client is in another state.

I asked Yvonne if she maintained contact with client schools between visits.

Yvonne -

- Oh, yes. Constantly! I've got about 200 people that I keep contact with all the time through email. They know I'm their person for questions. Anytime I hear about new things or I want to remind them about something that's coming up and how to be prepared for it, any news issues that have brought forth a change in the way we're going to do things, I use email and get that out there. I often have people who are not in one of my districts contact me and ask if they can be included in one of my listserves. So I do that.
- In my private consulting it's pretty much the same thing. I know things don't happen in little compartments. You have to be available when questions come up. So I do the best I can.
- When I hire a content specialist to help restructure a district, that person is in regular contact with me because I'm the one who schedules her and makes all the arrangements and makes sure her bills are paid out of the grant so that we get the most out of her services. I do this so the expertise that is needed is getting where it's needed.

One day I received a tape from Yvonne on which she shared additional thoughts about working off-site for her partnering schools.

I just thought I'd take a minute to talk about what I think makes a really good consultant in terms of being successful and meeting clients' needs. When you are a consultant you are there to advise, coach, mentor, train, analyze and all those various services. But if a person is going to make it as a consultant, especially if they are self-employed, they're going to have to think about the time commitment and responsiveness. I believe it's just like being a successful administrator. It's not a job that is defined by normal business hours or normal business days. For me to be able to do the research and to balance my two jobs as a consultant for the state and as a private consultant and meet my clients' needs, I have to do whatever it takes and I have to put in whatever time it takes. It might require that I'm preparing things and doing research on the weekends and in the evenings. Sometimes it involves going out of my way to find the materials I want for a particular workshop and coming prepared, not expecting my client to do all the work and showing up to impart my great wisdom and knowledge. When you're hired, you should come prepared. That's just my philosophy.

In spite of my interviewees' detailed descriptions of roles and explanations about how they fulfilled them, I wanted to understand more about how they chose their roles. The next section reports my findings.

### **Consultants Discuss Their Preference for Role Flexibility versus Role Consistency**

I wanted to know whether these five commendable consultants attempted to play the same roles wherever they went. My question during interview 3 was, “Do you value the ability to maintain consistency of role as you move from school to school, or do you value flexibility and strive to adjust your role from one school to the next?” Ann was the only respondent who said she favors consistency. However, her answer reflects the job she held at the time of this interview, which largely required her to monitor Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant compliance in schools throughout her state. She responded,

I think the consistency. When I go into the schools, I have a guidance that pretty much dictates what should be going on in CSR schools, what’s allowable as far as expenditures from this grant that they receive. I’ve got a process and it’s the same for every school. I don’t see the same thing, but I’m looking for components. They may look different, but there should be some way that they can share with me, for example, how they’re going to evaluate their implementation. It won’t be the same way, but I want to know about it in every school. And I want to know about support that will come from the district. When I go into schools, that’s something I address with every school.

All of the other consultants said they valued flexibility above consistency. Even Sheryl who was employed by a model provider replied, “Each community is unique and you can’t do this cookie cutter stuff.” She said she changes her role from time to time and that in some instances, “The change is very deliberate—very conscious.” As an example, she explained that as she approaches a

meeting with “folks over in central office,” she deliberately chooses an appropriate role. I asked her if she ever went so far as to change the way she dresses from one school to another. I expected her to say no, but instead she answered,

I would. I know that in some settings in urban areas you better dress up because they’re checking you out. You better have good shoes on and nice clothes. I would usually dress up a little bit more than my audience. A lot of it is because of wanting to be age appropriate. I’m usually the oldest person in the room. It’s not so much being a person of authority, but I do feel that I am a role model.

Eve also issued a caveat, saying that although she definitely values flexibility, she thinks that “within our ability to accommodate each school as you meet them, there is a huge body of action, strategies, concepts and so on that we would also be very consistent with.”

During Ed’s third interview, we had the following exchange.

I asked, “As you go from school to school, do you consciously change the role you plan to play after you take the measure of their understanding, or do you go in with a plan and stick to it?”

He responded, “Oh, no, no, no. More the former than the latter. I go with the flow.”

Could you explain that further?”

“For example, if I see a principal who may be timid or hesitant or not sure, I might become a little bit more directive. On the other hand if I sense that they

have a good handle on what's going on, then I would become a little less directive."

"Are you saying that you value flexibility over consistency?"

"Well, that's true for me. There are people in love right now with this whole thing about teaching teachers about data analysis, so they bring in—I don't know what all the big names are. And they come in and they don't care what the school's all about. They come in with a package and that's what they train and they teach. And you follow that package. If that's what people want and need, then that's appropriate. But that's not what I do, so obviously I put more of a premium on flexibility.

"Is being flexible tiring or wearing on you?" I asked.

"No, not at all."

"You prefer it?"

"Yeah, that part's part of my style, part of my personality preference."

As Eve did, Ed also added a caveat, explaining that once he makes an agreement to teach a coaching series and the curriculum and completion standards are determined, he will not change those midway through the series even when pressured to do so by sponsors. Since his name will be on exit certificates, in that situation he holds to consistency rather than flexibility.

When I asked Yvonne my flexibility-consistency question, she presented a balanced response.

Well, you do have to be true to yourself in what you believe. So there is going to be certain consistency all the time. You know if you can't look at

yourself in the mirror and say the way this district operates is not within my belief system and I cannot continue to...I mean you always have that. At least I do. If I can't respect people anymore, they need somebody else, because I'm not going to do it.

But I do believe flexibility is important because it's not a cookie cutter kind of thing. You have different school culture going on from one building to the next, different levels of expertise on the part of the principal, how they view themselves and what role they should play. You have issues with the staff. Are they excellent teachers? Do you have a group of burned out teachers? So I don't know how you could just go in and be the same everywhere. I just can't see that working.

### Closing

It is interesting to note that although the five consultants whom I interviewed spoke freely about the roles they play while consulting, none ever began a response with, "I am a...." They gave themselves no titles. Even Eve whose reputation is well known and Ed whose work spans the nation made no pronouncements of position among consultants. The theme woven unbrokenly throughout all participants' interviews was service. They serve clients in multiple ways, hence the plethora of roles they identified.

As I reach the end of this chapter, I am reminded of Dawson's (2000) description of knowledge. Speaking from a consultant's viewpoint, he defines it as, "the capacity to act effectively" (p. 3). He employs this definition because he

believes that knowledge changes as it transfers from one person to another and, in so doing, becomes useful to new people in unique settings for special purposes. He says further that it is during this knowledge sharing period that consultants and clients develop intimate relationships that prove to be “enduring and profitable” (p. 28). It seems evident from my interviewees’ words that over time, they learned from their clients even as they disseminated knowledge to them. Through many interactive relationships, they have refined their roles until today they speak as commendable consultants, confident and purposeful. As Dawson suggests, these consultants set out to serve clients by increasing their knowledge, but in that process they have increased their own confidence and focus.

*In the next chapter, I report on the methods they utilize to fulfill their chosen roles by increasing clients’ capacity for school improvement.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT: METHODS COMMENDABLE CONSULTANTS USE TO FULFILL THEIR CHOSEN ROLES

As the time approached for my fourth and final interview with each consultant, I reviewed each one's previous transcripts and drew mental images of them moving about their clients' schools doing the work they had described. I saw them arriving at a different building each day, taking their materials to an assigned room, and waiting for teachers and administrators to join them for the day's work. Because they had told me so many times that they liked to learn about their client schools by being unobtrusive observers, I pictured them walking the halls, listening to teachers and students talk, noticing bulletin boards, and just absorbing the current climate. But I was still wondering exactly how they accomplished what they came to do. Although bits of information about methods had surfaced earlier when they described their interactions with administrators and teachers, I looked forward to an opportunity during this last interview to learn specific details about what they do in pursuit of accomplishment.

*This chapter begins with consultants' descriptions of methods they use early in new school partnerships. They first make initial visits and then hold early-stage meetings while establishing relationships with building principals and leadership teams and making themselves known to other staff members. Next, this chapter examines later-stage sessions, placing consultants in varied scenarios where they respond to teachers' and principals' need for trust and diplomacy. Then, this chapter explains methods consultants utilize to strengthen*



principals' leadership capacity and the power of teacher groups commonly called leadership teams, school improvement teams, or professional learning communities. In the subsequent section, I report behind-the-scenes preparation and up-front presentation methods I observed while shadowing two consultants. This chapter closes with participants' explanations of how they cope with resistance.

### Methods Employed during the Beginning Stage of New Partnerships

As the interviewees spoke, they made me understand that in their opinion there is no time to waste once a partnership with a new school begins. Even during the initial on-site visit, there is much to be accomplished. They immediately want to become acquainted with the principal and leadership team, and they want to become visible to the extended staff.

#### *Initial Visits*

Before Eve begins working with teachers in new client schools, she wants to get to know their principals. Putting her goal in her words, she wants to “get a feeling of what makes them tick first.” This goal sends her occasionally into principals' offices behind closed doors, but more often she sets off on “walkabouts” with them. Although she appears to be simply meeting people and seeing the building, she actually has additional motives.

*It's important for me to see what the principal looks at and what he or she considers good instruction, what he or she looks at when they enter classrooms, what they think about in terms of what this professional*

development means to them, how willing they are to sacrifice time to arrange for professional development. It's important for me to get the feel of the school.

Eve added that during the walk-about, principals introduce her informally to teachers, although she is often re-introduced more formally later in staff meetings. I asked if, during that first visit, she has any concerns about being seen as in the principal's pocket so to speak or already taking an administration viewpoint. She replied in the affirmative.

Yes, I do and I have to be really, really careful about that. And I have to say that no matter how careful I am sometimes it probably still happens, because technically I am an emissary of instructional improvement and instructional change and that means work and sometimes it's out of the comfort level for people. So, yeah, no matter how you couch it, it's inevitable that people will feel—what is she going to say about me? So I try to be as open as possible. I try to have conversations with teachers after visits and I try to encourage them to question me. I set up all kinds of scenarios to make it more palatable. Do they still view me as the boogie man? They probably do. But I think it becomes easier over time.

During her interview Eve indicated that she values classroom visits. She spoke about them at length, saying that she hopes to see teaching, but that very often the teacher is giving directions or walking around the room or reading from a book. "I like to listen to hear if the teacher has any purpose. What is the

purpose of whatever she's doing?" When Eve can't detect this purpose, she turns her attention to the students in the room.

I watch the engagement of the kids. Are the kids really listening, paying attention, fussing with a million other things? Are they gazing in the air? Do they have a puzzled look on their face? Are they working at all? Are they getting down to work after the teacher speaks? Then I like to talk to kids and I ask them questions like "Tell me what you've been learning and what you've been reading." If I'm looking over a shoulder and I see something that's out on the desk, I try and ask a casual question about it or I may say to them, "Gee, I just walked in. Can you tell me what the teacher wants you to do at this moment?" And then I'll ask some questions like, "Do you think you're ready to start?" I want to get some kind of feedback from the kids to see where they are in this whole scenario. Is everything going over their heads, or are they really understanding what they're expected to do?

When Sheryl makes her initial visit, she does not necessarily dwell in classrooms, but she does carefully study interaction between teachers, between students and teachers, and between students. Her starting point is "that notion of culture." As she peruses the school she asks herself, "Is this a place where people care about one another? Are they respectful of one another? Do they have a shared purpose about their work and are they collaborative and reflective in the way that they work?" At this point in our interview, Sheryl did not explain exactly how she draws her conclusions. However, some time later I shadowed

her while she attended a two-day event held by a client school to celebrate their improvement. I accompanied her as she strolled in and out of classrooms during the day and observed student performances during the evening. I found her nearly continuous low-key monologue intriguing. Her eye was sharp. As she watched students and teachers with a subtle intensity, always maintaining a small smile, she spoke quietly to me about the successes and challenges she was observing. I understood that when Sheryl is in a client school, she is far more alert to her environment than her appearance might suggest and her mind is continuously processing sounds and sights around her.

During Ann's initial visit, she hopes to meet all of the school's stakeholders. She goes to classrooms and moves around so that she can not only observe teachers, but also mingle with students. If the school has a dedicated parent resource room, she meets with parents there. When she goes to the principal's office she doesn't mind waiting for awhile in the outer office where she can observe interactions. If grade level teams or committees of any sort are convening, she sits in on those meetings.

Ed also likes to move around the building during his initial visit. He visits the media center "just to see how they're using technology and whether people have evolved from the role of librarian to media specialist." He goes to the lunch room to see "if there's order or chaos and how teachers interact with students during that period." In elementary schools, he watches recess, noticing whether teachers "just toss a ball out and stand and talk to each other or whether they're

actively engaged with students.” In classrooms Ed observes how students are grouped and methods teachers are using.

Yvonne also hopes to see the entire school during her initial visit and remains alert even in hallways where she notes “noises, sounds, interactions.” While she visits regular and enrichment classrooms, the parent resource room, the library and computer labs, the gym, playground, lunch program, and main office, she examines building cleanliness and looks for evidence of best practice such as graphic organizers on walls and bulletin boards.

Yvonne has less faith than Eve in the value of walking about with the principal, especially when she is trying to learn about the teachers. She believes she will be more likely to see the real school if she walks around alone, so she finds reasons to return soon for informal visits.

If the principal is standing there with me, do you really believe that any of the teachers—when I’m in their classroom and just chatting a little bit or meeting with them in a committee—would they be forthright with me? No they would not. So you let people know you’re there and what your purpose is, but as I said I get a lot more information by being at the building for one reason and then hanging around and strolling around and just sort of picking up my own impressions.

Yvonne also likes to make some of these visits unannounced.

If they know you’re there, sometimes you’re not going to see what’s really happening, so you find a lot of other reasons to drop into the building, but while you’re there you’ve got your radar turned on to pick up little things

you might not have seen during that first visit. Walking around in classrooms you start to see things. You start to see a picture of the climate.

In comparing Eve's and Yvonne's initial visit techniques, I should note that whereas Yvonne consults for districts in one region of her state, Eve often travels to other states to consult. Unannounced drop-in visits would not be feasible for Eve.

### *Early Meetings*

By the time Sheryl has her first meeting with leadership teams, she has usually been in the building enough to have formed an opinion about their school culture. She knows that in order to take each school from where it is to where she thinks it ought to be, she must first prepare the school's leaders. Her early meeting methods are tri-fold. She clarifies her model's values and beliefs; she guides attendees as they identify their values and beliefs; and she then helps them locate counterparts in these dual belief systems.

Ann's methods during early meetings with new clients center upon encouraging them to take responsibility for self-analysis. "I strongly encourage them to evaluate the culture and climate of their building." I asked Ann if she offers to do this together with them or if she just encourages them to do it on their own. She replied that she does offer to be a resource for them, but that she wants them to conduct the assessment. Sometimes this proves to be an early struggle with a new client, because they want to jump immediately to student learning and solve the issue that forced them to seek external consultant help.

Many times I find that schools want to overlook culture and climate issues, because they feel that they're not able to get at student learning. But I try to help them see how that impacts student learning if you're not providing a learning community, if it's not a place that's conducive to learning and nurturing to all the stakeholders. So I just try to help them take a look at what it is that is keeping them from being the best school that they can be.

Culture and climate, referenced by the consultants, is explained in literature as that component of organizational life that influences what members think about their organization's function and how they feel toward it (Boxx, Odom, and Dunn, 1991; Peterson and Deal, 1998; Brown, 1995). Peterson and Deal point out that culture takes time to develop. Having formed over time as people interacted for a common purpose, culture develops into an enduring web "that binds the school together and makes it special" (p. 28). It is not easily changed. Beyond normal assumptions that experienced educators might make about school culture, consultants cannot know the precise culture and climate of a new client school. Their need to know is complicated by the fact that school personnel are not always able to thoroughly articulate their school's culture, which is why some consultants urge leadership teams to use assessment tools to learn more about their school. Consultants need to bring leadership teams to a single, shared understanding about their culture so that together they can begin necessary modifications and develop readiness for initiative implementation.

Yvonne also commented that she cannot learn everything she needs to know by walking around. Using somewhat different methods than Ann, Yvonne

gathers school data herself, often using a diagnostic tool to assess “what’s eating at people.” Her tool of choice might be a survey such as the Gallup Q-12 (n.d.), which she described as “sort of a barometer of the health of the organization in terms of how employees feel toward their employer or their workplace.” Yvonne has also invited in other consultants who specialize in conducting cultural audits. Like Ann, Yvonne then tries to use early meetings to convince staff members to take an honest look at their situation.

You start off by presenting the facts and then trying to glean from them what they think is getting in the way. You just have to talk to them and listen to them. You don’t pose what you think it is. You try to get them to tell you what it is. Hopefully a person like me has enough background or expertise to be able to sift through what is just their personal opinion from what the black and white data is telling.

Some of the consultants’ early meetings are restricted to administrator training. Sheryl devotes one session to informing the principal about her model’s basic tenets and composing with the principal a “general letter of understanding” that delineates the steps that need to be taken toward school improvement. She said that this letter in effect becomes a statement of change theory. During this early session, Sheryl carefully walks the principal through explicitly stated requirements for the partnership, explaining how often leadership teams must meet and insisting that the principal attend team working sessions. She informs the principal that his school will be expected to network with other schools using the same model, attend regional training workshops, and eventually contribute



teams to celebratory events for peer schools. She even tells the principal about another school that did not abide by their letter of understanding and was reported to the state. She provides previous clients' names and contact information and encourages new principals to talk with them to better gauge the long-term effort that is being launched. Sheryl concluded by saying, "This is a commitment. This is a major partnership."

Ann also incorporates principal training into early meetings. However, she presents herself less as a trainer than as a bridge between teacher leaders and their principal. She begins by surveying the leadership team, asking them to rate their principal's positive involvement on a scale of one to ten. She sometimes does this with the principal in the room, but she says, "If they're not comfortable responding with the principal being in the room, I will ask the principal to step out while we have a conversation about it." Ann said she sometimes has already observed inadequate principal involvement, but she uses this method to allow that message to flow from teachers to the principal. She also uses this method to protect herself, since she realizes that she may happen to visit on a day the principal is unusually tied to his office and inaccurately denigrate his commitment to instructional leadership. "So what I'll do is gather information to determine if my observation is accurate." When she feels she has a true understanding of the principal's support for teachers, she has a private conversation with the principal and shares her findings.

Ed, on the other hand, is far more hesitant to talk with principals about how they are perceived by their teachers. He said that even when he is asked to

do this by principals, his standard reply is, “Okay, but there’s great risk involved. You may not like what people say about you anonymously.” When a principal insists that she wants some feedback on her leadership style, Ed does comply, most often with the aid of principal assessment survey tools.

The five participating consultants revealed divergent practices when they described their initial visits and early-stage meetings, but those varied practices center around a single purpose—to see and be seen. They want to establish relationships capable of incubating nascent improvement initiatives. Once consultants’ initial conversations and early on-site visits are completed, members of the newly formed consultant-school partnership have met each other, gathered data, identified needs, and established goals. Now the agreed upon work period (usually one to three years) begins. In the following section, consultants discuss additional methods that they find useful once they move beyond a new partnership’s beginning stage.

### Methods Employed During the Later Stage of Continuing Partnerships

As the agreed-upon series of consulting sessions unfolds and moves beyond early-stage meetings, consultants’ methods shift from gathering clarifying data to pressing schools forward into change initiatives. Eve said that at this time she carefully avoids acting the part of an official authorized to announce progress. “I have to have them come to conclusions about what is really happening and what is not really happening.” When teachers and administrators announce progress to her, she replies, “Show me where you think that’s

happening.” If she reversed the process and told them where they were, they would feel that she was just there to, as she says, “beat them over the head, and that usually turns people off.” Instead, by using staff members’ happy announcements of progress as opportunities for deeper analysis, Eve can begin to teach. “Then I have a basis with which to start imparting some knowledge.” Eve personifies concepts espoused by Dawson (2000) and described in Chapter 6; that is, transferred knowledge can be reconfigured and made useful to recipients in ways unique to their situation. Eve’s deeper analysis methods are modeled in the presence of school leaders, so they will be able to apply analysis skills to future situations where progress must be measured.

Yvonne is equally determined that as time in a particular partnership passes and her consulting sessions unroll, she will not slip into the practice of marking her client’s progress. “You don’t pose what you think it is. You try to get them to tell you what it is.” She relies upon her expertise to help her “sift through what is just their personal opinion from what the black and white data is telling them.” When initiative implementation flounders, when teachers and administrators become discouraged and fall back upon blaming their communities’ children, Yvonne turns to “studies that point to success with kids who are the most challenging population” to remind them that “it can be done.”

Coincidentally, as Yvonne spoke about bringing research to bear upon educators’ discouragement, she identified another method that intrigues her. At the time of our interview, she was reading a book that helped her understand that in this era of instant information access, consultants must teach clients how to

sort through and identify the most helpful data. Keeping in mind that “the reason you’re being hired is to turn things around in the shortest time possible,” Yvonne said she is now going to consider what new methods she might develop to teach staff members how to not only access information, but also how to weigh its value for their situation and rank its applicability.

As my participants talked about advancing past the early stage of their partnerships, they described methods they utilize to enact two best practices: (1) build trust and (2) convey diplomacy.

#### *Consultants Build Trust*

Yvonne practices trust building to counter school atmosphere that seems too often bereft of trustworthiness. “I’m just kind of musing that I wish I saw more integrity in the way people conduct themselves in decision making roles in the districts. There are very few people out there who you can trust. If they say they will do something they need to do it.” Yvonne models dependability. “If I tell someone I’m going to do something, I do it. I see things through right to the end no matter what the problems are that get in the way. It’s going to get done.” She also is careful to maintain confidence. “If they [clients] are going to speak to you in confidence you have to keep that confidence or you’re not worth your fee, because they will never trust you again.”

For Sheryl, trust building requires purposeful methodology because in some of her client districts, “there is a high level of distrust between the union and the management.” If teachers assume she is coming in support of the administration, they are immediately suspicious of her motives. “So I think you

have to be rather intentional about trying to build some of those trusting relationships, not just with the administrative team, but also with the union."

Ed also has concerns about appearing trustworthy to school improvement teams. He looks upon pre-agreements as a safeguard. "I would negotiate early on what I'd be looking for, so I wouldn't be playing gotcha in any of these sessions." I asked Ed if, once a need has been identified, he brings to meetings samples of instruments they might use to pursue answers. He replied, "I wouldn't bring them up at that point. I don't want them to think I have all the answers. Oh, here's what you need. I happen to have it right here. Then it's suspect. Was I really looking with an open mind?" Ed waits until teams tell him they want to see instruments and then brings them in "at subsequent sessions." Ed builds trust by asking questions, "a lot of questions." Although he knows that he needs to "raise their consciousness, their awareness of their own situation," he accomplishes this through careful questioning, "helping them identify what they think the problem is. Why they haven't been successful, why particular approaches aren't working." Ed guides the questioning process until clients determine what their preferred outcome is. Once they have self-identified and now own the problem and hoped for answer, he can propose solutions, confident that he has earned and can maintain their trust.

Ann expects that teachers and principals will not trustingly accept her advice unless they overcome doubts about her understanding of their plight. "I try to help them understand that I've walked in their shoes." She relates experiences from the field, talking to teachers about when she taught and to principals about

when she was an administrator. In her story telling, she also tells success stories from schools with similar demographics and challenges. "I think it's important for them to feel that anyone who comes to support them is coming from that perspective." She says that in addition to story telling, her methods include research. "But when I say research, it could be another school district that's very similar. I link them to another similar school and the success that they've had." She points staff members to a website where they can find schools with demographics similar to theirs, and she encourages them to invite a team from a similar school to "come and talk with them or send a team to visit a school that is doing better."

Sheryl explained that in her role as a representative of the model provider for which she works, her trust building methods are very deliberate.

We have a little mantra that we've been using lately. Follow through and follow up. They have to know they can count on us, that we are accessible. We have to be very transparent about what we do and why we do it. We try to make it not a mystery as to each step of the process we go through and why we make the demands upon them that we do. So we just try to have open dialogue and practice those elements of professional learning community. That's why we use norms. It gives us that kind of consistency. It builds a culture of trust when you have norms that they have helped establish. We're always talking about student achievement, so there's that shared vision about why we're doing this.

Sheryl explained further that sometimes trust can be enhanced through something as simple as setting realistic time frames. "There's a sense of urgency about the work that we do because there is a time frame. We have this year; we have three years; we have a semester. We need to show improvement and growth from this date to a future date." Sheryl tries to establish reasonable target dates that can be met so clients come to believe she will deliver as promised.

Like Sheryl, Yvonne adopted a business-like tone when she spoke about her trust building methods. She is not personally offended by teachers' and principals' initial distrust of her. Experience has taught her to expect it, and she knows what to do as well as what not to do.

You don't come in criticizing and changing. You come in listening and watching and asking questions and looking at the facts so that you're not caught in any of the drama or negative culture that may exist. You always have to put yourself in the position of listening, not taking sides if you can avoid it and using the facts as a vehicle to communicate. You have to have a common ground. So if you don't know them real well and they don't know you real well, you have to show them that you know how to get information, that you have information about them, and that you'd like to hear their story.

If they know why you've been hired, sometimes they already have some feelings about the whole matter. They may not like you just because you're not one of them and you're coming in and they're not too sure just what you're going to do. It takes time. You have to show them that you're

there for them. You want their input. You want to hear what they have to say, but you keep bringing them back to the facts. Some people are going to accept you for it, and some are going to be threatened. And there's not a whole lot you can do about that.

One especially intriguing component of my participants' trust building lay in their discussion of when to practice directive methodology—telling clients exactly what she thinks they need to do. Yvonne said she hesitates to appear too forceful and that she is especially likely to refuse to comply when school boards instruct her to veto principals' plans with which she disagrees.

That business about being directive and vetoing—that's not going to work. And you know what? The board and the superintendent are going to back down, because they want a decent relationship with their principals, too. They know that if they push too hard, they could have other legal issues on their backs.

Consultants' experiences with trust were not always in the context of being considered trustworthy themselves. They also asked for trust from the clients. Ed gave an example of a situation in which he might become more directive than usual as a means to require his clients to be more transparent and, therefore, more trustworthy.

There are times when as a facilitator you move along the continuum from non-directive to directive. Some people may be afraid to make a change, or don't want to make a change, or don't want to address the systemic issues in their schools. For example, we might be talking about whether



we could have a better structure for student organization that would help them learn better? Some teachers don't even want to address that because they think if we go to team teaching or house assignments, they won't get to have lunch with their friend who's an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher while they're a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. So they may rebut that change because they have ulterior motives that are not directly related to student achievement. And so in those cases I think that as the facilitator, I would move that conversation up to the more directive level about the commitment that people have to make in order to make the change successful.

As the consultants spoke about building trust that might stretch between clients and themselves and also of trust capable of linking one school staff member to another, they illuminated their understanding that school improvement initiatives require functioning networks. Gradually consultants, administrators, and teachers must network through all levels and work on initiatives in tandem. Breaks in such networks retard progress,, so consultants practice preventative diplomacy. They proactively develop client trust and model trustworthy network participation before their clients. They clearly understand Maister, Green, and Galforour's (2000) caution that "Trust is a two-way relationship....Your client must participate and reciprocate" (p. 23). Knowing that clients may not instinctively build a trust-based network and participate and reciprocate in a trusting consultant partnership, they follow Carucci and Pasmore's (2002) advice. "Model behaviors you expect your client to demonstrate....Modeling on the part of the consultant demonstrates the consultant's willingness to take the first step"

(p. 39). Maister, et al. suggests an intriguing twist on modeling. If a consultant wants to model a behavior that he believes important to a relationship, he needs to deliberately create opportunities to do so. In the case of modeling trustworthiness, the consultant might make promises and keep them, set deadlines for herself and adhere to them, and something as simple as starting and concluding meetings at agreed upon times.

### *Consultants Demonstrate Diplomacy*

Wanting to know whether consultants sometimes find it necessary to mask instinctive responses to client behavior I asked Eve and Yvonne, "Do you put on a blank face and try to hide those reactions?" Eve said she does; Yvonne said she can't always but she is often cautious, especially early on. From Eve –

Yes, generally I do. I try to reserve my reactions in a manner that will help me get them to *rethink* this, to think again, to respond to more probing questions, to get to the bottom of how they're feeling, and to actually bring them around to a point of considering whether this has really worked.

Where is the evidence that this has worked?

I asked, "Do you adopt that practice because you feel that showing your reaction would set up a barrier?"

Well, I guess it depends on the stage at which I'm working with the people. Now if I've been working with them for over a year and we've built a trusting relationship and I know they can hear something point blank, then I will say something point blank. If this is the beginning of a relationship, generally I will reserve a comment. It's not that I wouldn't say, "Well, this is

what I believe or this is what I have found in my experience. However, I would add, "Let's discover this together." I would kind of bring them around in a way in which it would be more palatable for them. The idea is not to turn people off before you turn them on. And so however you get to that result you kind of have to read it at the time.

I asked Yvonne, "Do you go so far as to actually be guarded so you don't let a sudden look of dismay show?"

Oh, I'm too dramatic. I make faces. I'm sure there are times when they can tell that I'm not happy about something. I would think so. I don't think I'm good at hiding that kind of thing. But to be able to quote me, would it come out of my mouth? Probably not unless I thought something good would come out of it or it would cause them to stop and think for a minute before they do what they're going to do anyway. Then I would risk it. Now understand there will be people that I work with every single day. I'm on my second year now with this one district, and there are some people I'm actually getting friendly with and I've been hired to help those people. Now with them, if they open up to me, I in turn will open up to them. But do I make that a rule of thumb? No. I have to be careful.

Yvonne then explained in greater detail her need to be careful.

At first you have to be extremely careful, so you don't do a whole lot of talking other than factual kind of talking. You have to be really cautious to stick with the facts. Once you start building a relationship and some trust with your client, maybe at that point you can reveal some of your

personal—if it's going to help explain why you will or will not go down a certain path and justify—I've had to say to a client, "Look you hired me for my opinion. I'm giving you my opinion. If you don't want to hear my opinion, that's fine. Don't ask for it then, but sometimes my opinion is not going to agree with you, and I'll tell you why." But it really just—again, consulting situations are not a cookie cutter kind of thing. I would share if my views supported or even didn't support someone, if I trusted that I could honestly tell them without compromising our working relationship I'd do it. But sometimes you have to really say, is this the hill I want to die on? Is it my place as their consultant to tell them this? If I think that by being quiet they could head down a path that could cause them an ethical or a legal issue or get them into trouble with the union, I'm going to say something. And they can summarily disregard it. But you gotta be careful. Yeah, you really have to watch it.

As I listened to the consultants talk about how they behave with clients, I began to wonder whether they consciously decided to establish a certain persona, and I especially wondered if they deliberately spoke or acted differently in the presence of eager versus more hesitant teachers and administrators. I wanted to know if they relied on some kind of self-training or instinct. When I asked them about this, I learned that Ann didn't think client eagerness affected her discourse style, but Ed, Sheryl and Yvonne were influenced by the relative receptiveness of their audience. Ann begins.

Do I speak differently? No, I don't think so. Maybe. The kind of information I share might be slightly different, but I don't think I act any differently. I might try to be a little more enthusiastic, show more enthusiasm and hope that it will be contagious with the hesitant followers. The eager beavers are there ready to go. I might have to come out with more information on how this has benefited others. The eager beavers may already have that information or feel they will support it because they know it's going to have an impact on their situation. But other than that, I don't really know that I do.

Ed continues.

With eager beavers, it's a matter of just steering, guiding. They'll handle their own discussion. The motivation is there. With people that are more hesitant, it takes a lot more to draw them out and figure out why they are hesitant. Is it there's no concurrence on the goal? They're not sure why I'm there, why they're there? They're not clear about what the expectations are? They're not clear what the tasks are? So that takes a bit more work to find out what the real issue is. With eager beavers, it's a matter of just steering them I think.

Sheryl's response was lengthy, but I report its entirety because it depicts thinking that the consultants indicated they do in order to find their way to methods that works for them.

Umm, I would say I'm probably more—with eager beavers I'm probably more straight forward or more aggressive in sharing information and

resources and so on as opposed to more hesitant folks. I probably don't come on quite as strong with them. I may try to, oh, do a little empathizing in some way.

I guess I can give you an example. Over at one of my schools there is a gal who was at the high school and is now at the middle school, and she's been negative from day one. I stopped by her classroom when I was there last week, and we started talking about the new graduation requirements. She's convinced that the kids in her school can't meet those expectations. They have a large special Ed population. Excuse after excuse after excuse.

So other than lashing out at her, which I'd like to do, I said—because she said this doesn't match up with brain research—I just said, “You know I used to feel that way about the new expectations for kindergarten. I was a kindergarten teacher, and I didn't feel that some of the new expectations were developmentally appropriate. Teaching and expecting kindergartners to read and so on. Then I went to a kindergarten classroom where 40% of the kids were poor Black kids and 40% were poor Hispanic kids and the rest were poor white kids. And I watched this enthusiastic, gifted kindergarten teacher, and those kids were learning all of their letters; making letter-sound associations; they were reading words; they were jumping up and down excited with math concepts. I didn't see one kid in tears or frustrated that he or she couldn't do it.” And I said, “You know I

just had to kind of change my paradigm from what I had thought all these years after having that experience. It can be done.”

So that’s the way I would react, initially anyway, with the people who are slow to come on board. If there are people that after a few interactions it’s obvious they aren’t going to change; they don’t want to change, my philosophy is that you don’t invest any time or energy in them. You just ignore them as much as you can without being rude. You just spend your time and energy working with the eager beavers and those people that just need some time and they need to see some evidence and they need to have some conversation, genuine conversation about what this means and what it looks like and what’s involved with it and do we have proof or some examples of where it’s worked, that kind of thing. I don’t have any problem interacting with people along that continuum.

When I asked Yvonne if she behaves differently with teachers who display more or less willingness to participate, she replied,

Oh, probably. Yeah, I would think so. Very definitely. It’s kind of like situational leadership. Where’s the other person coming from? Do you need to be directing them every step of the way? Do you need to coach them, support them, or do you just need to delegate or be there to lend encouragement and more resources? So much depends on the other party. If their attitude is that they don’t want you there, you have to come in with a very different approach to win them over. In other words, there’s the woo thing versus the folks that are ready to go and they just want

somebody to show them the way. I've seen both. You can really take off with people who are ready to move and are cooperative and know that things need to change and want to see them change versus people who don't want things to change and do their level best to avoid it. One size does not fit all in this.

Even as consultants adjust their methods to match particular teachers, they also have specific methods to meet the special needs of principals. In the section to come, I report their actions and observations about their work with principals.

### Methods Employed While Working with Principals

When I shadowed consultants, I seldom saw them interacting solely with principals. I never was privy to a closed-door meeting with just the principal and consultant present. As they described their methods, they frequently described scenarios where they consulted with teacher leaders with or without principals. However, when I asked them to describe their principal-only methods, they willingly complied. Ed explained that his methods with principals are not noticeably different than when he is with teachers, but that he seeks out principals' views of their schools' situations since he wants to measure their awareness. He also noted that some principals have "pretty prescribed roles, how they think they should be perceived by others and what they think their job is." Ed wants to know what that perception is.



I asked Ed, "Later when you come back for subsequent visits with principals and you begin using training methods, are you overt or subtle about the fact that you're training them?" He replied,

Probably subtle, but also the agreement is this is what they need. So I would feel comfortable bringing back an inventory, data collection methods, processes saying, "Maybe this is what you need. Maybe it isn't. Let's take a look at it. What do you think?" Essentially it's to direct them toward resources that they can develop and use on their own.

As a means of directing a principal's attention toward a solution for a weakness in performance that Ed has detected, he sometimes relies upon tools developed by others. For example, his state has gathered together information intended to help principals from low performing schools. Ed turns to a section and asks, "Have you looked at this?" and invites the principals to explore it with him.

Eve begins her work with principals by measuring their awareness of their schools' conditions.

I ask a lot of questions about what presently exists and try and get a sense of what the principal actually realizes or doesn't realize about his or her school. Then when we walk the school together, if we've had these preliminary conversations, I would usually say—you told me you were working on let's just say comprehension strategies in reading. What do you think would be evidence that we will see that tells me that that work is number one implemented and number two successful? Because a lot of

times I find that they really are not sure of that themselves. They're not really sure about what's been going on in their building.

So my guiding questions kind of bring that to the forefront without threatening them, because I'm saying to them so what do you consider evidence? So let's walk and talk. And we'll walk in and out of classrooms together, and in that process we start talking about what he or she sees and what I see. And (chuckling) usually what I look at in the process is different than what they look at. They will maybe look to see if every kid is sitting in their seats, if every kid has a workbook or a textbook, if they're all on the same page together, things like that. They rarely listen to the instruction going on from the teacher if there is any instruction going on. They rarely ask kids what they are doing, do they understand what they're doing, sit next to kids and talk to them. And so I model that while we're walking around, and we continue to talk and they're amazed at what I've noticed that they've never thought to look for.

After Eve has completed her walk-about with the principal, she initiates conversation about where to begin the improvement effort. "I have to find out where the breakdown is and then I have to support the person in moving toward a better process or a better system." One of Eve's areas of focus is principal led staff meetings. She shows principals how to change those sessions from an administration to an instruction orientation.

Principals often operate as managers and never really set a tone that says, "This is what I believe in about school. This is what I believe in about

education, and if I believe in this then these are my expectations for you.”

You almost have to try and get the principal to start thinking that way and then to start verbalizing it and then to start behaving—to walk the talk.

At this point Eve also holds joint meetings with the principal and teacher leader teams. “We start talking about the kinds of professional development that went on, the kinds of expectations there are, and the kinds of structures that are in place to implement that.” She first finds out whether the principal is setting aside adequate time for teacher leaders to get into other classrooms so they can model lessons and mentor peers. She says, “The principal’s role is to support the team,” and she expects him to organize a school schedule that allows the team to thoroughly monitor classroom teaching during the weeks that she is not in the building. She also wants principals to understand that leadership involves molding their staff into a community of learners and that it is their responsibility to make time for them to observe one another and to plan together. “By supporting the work, they send the message to everyone in the school that this is what they value and this is what their expectation is. Very often I coach the principal in how to do that and how to maintain that.”

Eve finds that principals often want her to do what they have not been capable of doing, but she refuses. She is there not to take over, but to strengthen principals’ leadership capacity.

Principals will very often say to me, you run the faculty meeting or you meet with this teacher or you run this, and I will say to them I can model

for you, but I'm here because I'm supporting you in doing this. Principals need to take hold of their role and not put me in the position of their role.

When Sheryl begins working with a new principal, she focuses on offering encouragement and affirmation. I noticed this especially while I shadowed her and observed the special care she took with one middle school principal. She had asked this young woman whom I'll call Rhonda to join a team convened for the purpose of making an evaluative visit to a school in a neighboring town. Rhonda had recently received a professional award, and Sheryl invited her to share this exciting news and to tell an expanded story about how this had occurred. During the team session Sheryl encouraged Rhonda to tell the team about her school's victories and also challenges they faced as they attempted to improve student achievement. This setting placed Rhonda among peers and consultants from Sheryl's team who could offer input. On another day, in a very different setting, Sheryl again nurtured Rhonda's professional development. Rhonda was one of the featured presenters for a regional meeting of leaders from schools working with Sheryl's school improvement model. She gave an excellent presentation complete with visual aids in which she told her school's story. While Sheryl's colleagues presented, Sheryl left the room twice, once to make phone calls and once to talk with me. But when Rhonda presented, Sheryl sat close by beaming her approval.

Sheryl told me that if she believes a principal is "missing the mark as far as how he or she is interacting and operating," She asks questions to determine what outcome the principal is hoping for and what methods he has been using.

After walking through classrooms, Sheryl tells the principal what evidence of best practice she did or did not see. Then she guides the principal into “substantive conversation around those strategies that research has identified as being effective as far as improving student achievement.”

As Sheryl's time with a client school continues, she notes whether principals are adhering to their original agreement with her.

If they were really going counter to what had been agreed upon in their application with us, I would move to probably being directive, pointing that out. “There was an agreement that we would be meeting half a day a month, for example, with the leadership. What do we need to do in order to do in order for that agreement to be kept?” So I would be holding them accountable, asking the questions that would get across to them that they need to be more accountable.

As Eve spoke about the work she does with principals, she returned to the theme of district support.

In my mind the leadership is crucial and the leadership is what sustains any change process. You can't do anything without the principal, and actually you can't really do anything unless the superintendent is also involved here, because one school doesn't make a successful district. If the superintendent is not involved and I'm working only with the principal, then the most I can hope for is that they won't be contradictory in the kinds of things we're doing which very often happens, too. That's why the more

they're involved with conversations and in agreement with where we're going in this particular school, the better off I am as a consultant.

My study participants' narrations indicate that they never work with principals in a vacuum. They know they can reach teachers by purposefully preparing principals to lead teachers. Of course, they don't stop there. In the following section, consultants describe methods they use when they move beyond principals to teacher leader groups or professional learning communities.

### Methods Employed for Teacher Groups

As the interviewees talked about their consulting methods, many of their explanations clustered around their group facilitation methods. All five consultants work frequently with building level teacher leader groups. Sometimes those groups are leadership teams consisting of certain teachers chosen from among their peers to aid the principal and mentor their peers. In other schools, groups adopt the format familiarly known as professional learning communities, allowing all teachers to gather in homogeneous groups for school improvement.

One afternoon I watched Sheryl meet with a leadership team from a middle school in a small town. We met in the library of an old 3-story brick building. It was the end of the school day and teachers, arriving soon after their children had left, headed gratefully to a small table bearing cookies, brownies, and beverages. The principal also attended, and I noticed that while not diminishing the importance of other members, Sheryl took care to encourage the principal's

participation. She did not necessarily give deference to the principal, but instead modeled respectful interest in all levels of educators around the table.

This team and Sheryl were nearing completion of the first year of their partnership. As I watched the session get underway, it seemed to me that these people were united and comfortable with each other. When Sheryl asked them to create small posters showing how they had met various goals, they promptly dove into the task and were soon on their feet covering designated sections of the walls with their posters. Later when their interaction became more verbal, everyone participated. They wanted to talk, not in generalities, but about their school's issues. Regardless of the topic that arose, they could apply it to specific students or school programs. It seemed evident that this group carried meeting content back to their everyday teaching life and thought about it extensively between meetings.

I especially noted that when one teacher who had been invited to this meeting for the first time as an at-large staff representative spoke, they listened attentively. Even when she mildly rebuked them for not keeping the staff as informed as they might have, they responded thoughtfully. Sheryl told me later that she tries to constantly model ways to contribute new ideas to team sessions and also how to respond to concerned attendees. It seemed that over a year's time her modeling had effectively molded this group into a cohesive team.

I asked Sheryl if, when she begins working with a new client school, she takes advantage of existing teacher social networks and trust among teachers. She replied that she immediately tries to build upon them and incorporate them

into her consulting plan for that school. She provides tools they might need to transition into new kinds of working groups.

You have to be very intentional about using those relationships. Where they exist there is an opportunity to strengthen them as professional learning communities. So you go in with the understanding that people have these networks and relationships. They are built on trust that either comes from social affinity or more than likely through some type of philosophical or pedagogical affinity. So you look at that as an asset and you think all right how do we now take that trusting relationship and provide folks the tools to use it to look at student data, identify achievement gaps, look at their own practice, share student work in a way so that they are deprivatizing their practice and help them become more professional and high minded in their interactions with one another and change the discourse that they might have from whining, complaining, or maybe from just talking about their personal lives. You change that discourse to one that is student centered around student academic outcomes.

I then asked Sheryl what she does if she finds that a new client school has no professional learning communities operating and specifically how she acts quickly enough so they produce results during her first year with them. She explained that she assumes teachers already know how to work collaboratively and that her task is to teach them structure. "You have to give them structure in the way of protocols, specific outcomes, an agenda, a very intentional way of



working.” Over time, Sheryl has dropped the practice of taking teachers through pretend work to learn how to do real work. She used to hold sessions with teachers for the purpose of teaching them about professional learning communities. She even had the teachers read a text, and she led discussions during which she taught teachers how such groups work. However, Sheryl said that today, under increased pressure to accomplish much in a short time, she does not pre-teach the concept. Instead, she sets groups up quickly, and teachers learn how to be a professional learning community simultaneously with working on authentic school needs. “They become a professional learning community by doing real work.” Sheryl added that this shift in the way she works feels comfortable to her since whenever she undergoes training of any sort herself, she is impatient with activities built around made up tasks.

Ed, on the other hand, prefers to launch team work with activities that have nothing to do with the work that lies ahead.

One of the things that I like to do although the activities will change—I like to do hands on experiential activities just to get them up and moving and not sitting and folding their arms, doing a problem solving experiential activity of some sort or another just so they can have some fun and loosen up. The activity may vary, but I like to do that kind of thing.

I asked Ed what would cause the activity to vary and whether anything he had learned about a particular school affects his activity choice. He responded, “No, it’s more size and time. How big is the group? How much time do I have? How

much time do I use for this and how much for a debrief? I think those are the bigger variables for me.”

Sheryl explained that she also teaches client staff members how to operate professional learning communities by modeling best practices when she meets with them.

I think we model everything that we say should be part of professional learning communities. You establish that reflective practice and collaboration culture on kind of this network scale, so every time they interact with us they know what to expect. We have these norms. We have this collaborative work. We do this reflection afterwards. Outcomes are always stated. We try to ask essential questions. And I think that's probably the biggest thing.

During some of Eve's sessions with professional learning communities, she serves merely as an observer and “just nonchalantly adds to the conversation as I feel comfortable or if I feel that they are comfortable with my adding to the conversation.” Other times she is asked to assist with the session as a facilitator in which case she is more active.

I would behave differently if I was asked to facilitate. If I was asked to facilitate I would know what the conversation was around. If it was around data, I would have to do my homework. I would know where I would want to go, what realizations I would want people to come to. What I showed, what I prepared, the questions that I asked and the questions that I would throw out for conversation would all lead towards that.

In Eve's discussion of leadership teams, she commented that they prove to be machinery useful for accomplishing her work. Trained groups can move her work forward during the time period between her on-site visits, and they can disseminate her expertise widely over the staff. Therefore, Eve's group way of working with a group includes projecting the work forward as she begins each visit. "What I try to do is formulate the agenda while I'm there, especially if it's a monthly basis. If I'm going into a school say in September, I will try to formulate my agenda for my next visit in October and after. So they already know this is what we're doing today and when I come back this is what we're going to be doing the next time."

Similar to Eve, Ed also recognizes leadership teams' capacity for disseminating his teaching to their fellow teachers.

*I have a saying that an experienced facilitator told me. He said, "The learning is not so much in the journey as it is in the landing. When you get there you're going to have a turbulent landing or a smooth, even landing." So I always use that as a metaphor for how do we take this stuff to others? How do you roll it out? What are the things we need to be aware of? What do we need to have on hand to get people to understand what the initiative is or what you're attempting to do? And then we just go from there, talking about what they think people need.*

*When Ed talked about what teachers will need from leadership teams, he included both ideas and items in hand. He gets down to the basics of "the how and what are you going to give them." His work is made easier when teams*

demonstrate that they already have presentation skills. “One school that I was in just recently had it all—had power point, color printers. Boy, they put together a packet together for their parent group, for the rest of the teachers. It was quite impressive.”

Because Ed depends on teams to spread his teaching among the entire staff, he knows that he has to “model really expert facilitation skills.” He talked about how he models.

For example if many teachers want to talk, I try to show them how you cue people up, how you gently remind people that we are all under a time limit and to be concise, move the agenda. I use the flip chart a lot to post notes and comments. So just through my behavior people can see. The reality is that they can’t bring me in all the time, nor should they. And the reality is that they have to develop their capacity to hold these kinds of conversations and sessions. So, I’m very deliberate. And people will say, “What do we do if we can’t get consensus?” I respond, “Well, what do you think we need to do? How do you think we might go about getting consensus? What does it mean to you? How are you defining it? Let’s take a look at what a good consensus model is.” It’s all those behaviors.

I then asked Ed whether he ever pauses to ask team members if they noticed that he just modeled for them. He replied,

No I don’t do it in the moment. I might do it in a summary, a debrief. “Let’s take a few minutes and talk about how we did today. How do you think we did as a group in making decisions?” And then they’ll say that. “How well

do you think we handled active participation? How well do you think we've handled active listening? Do you think anyone was really dominating?" I wouldn't do it in the moment because then it can be too disjointed.

Ann reported that the presence of professional learning communities in client schools is a boon to her work, so she is happy when she finds them already operational when she arrives. "We strongly encourage these professional learning communities, grade level teams that can work together, because they have common students they serve and responsibilities. So we strongly encourage that. And when I can go in and that's already set up, that's wonderful." Ann's methods as she described them involved far less modeling than Eve's or Ed's. She seemed to assume that her schools' professional learning communities were effectively functional and that her best contribution was simply to supplement group members' resources.

I try to find out what their needs are. Is there something I can do to support them? If they're looking for strategies, I can help them research that, even connect them to some professional that can support them if that's not my area of expertise. I can provide them with names.

Whether Ann is working with professional learning communities, school improvement teams, or leadership teams, she attempts to reinforce their independence. She wants them to develop capacity for implementing initiatives throughout their buildings.

In all of those settings one method that I find to be quite effective is using the process consultation method where again I'm helping whatever group

I'm working with to be very reflective. Helping them to reflect on what it is that they are discussing, helping them to consider what research says about it, past experience, kind of probing, helping to guide them through the conversations they are having. Helping them be self reflective to the point that they might say oh, that's not quite where we want to go, or there are some things we've not considered, or there are folks who need to be at the table who are not here. In order for us to move forward and have an effective implementation or problem solving, there are additional folks that we need to bring to the table or information that we need to have for these things that we've not considered.

In this passage Ann references process consultation, a method in which both she and Ed had previously trained. Ed described this method as "establishing the helping relationship—helping them to perceive, understand, and act on their own realities so that they can develop their own solution, because it's the solution they're going to implement and own." This method has been explained in literature (Blake, 1983; Hammer, 1996; Reddy, 1994; Schein, 1999). "A process perspective sees not individual tasks in isolation, but the entire collection of tasks that contribute to a desired outcome," explains Hammer (p. 11). Shein believes that many organization group members understand well the work they need to accomplish together, but that they are far less skilled in recognizing the processes they normally use as they work together. When Ann and Ed use this method, they stand back and observe their client teams in action and then highlight for members behaviors that they observed. They lead team

members through analytical discussions, helping them consider how they might modify their process in order to enhance productivity.

### *Methods Employed for Behind-the-Scenes Preparation and Up-Front Presentation*

In addition to interviewing each consultant four times, I also shadowed Sheryl and Yvonne in eleven distinct settings where they were either conducting behind-the-scenes preparatory sessions, teaching clients, celebrating success, or presenting to district stakeholders. Both spoke with me intermittently during the shadowings so I was able to gather data through both observation and conversation.

#### *Shadowing Sheryl*

Three years had passed since Sheryl began working with a particular high school, and it was time for a celebratory event. In preparation, Sheryl had called a team of consultant colleagues along with principals and teachers from other schools to a bed and breakfast where she would prepare them to evaluate the highlighted school. Although these people whom she had called together had all experienced her training previously, I noticed that Sheryl incorporated into this working session methods she ordinarily used with client personnel. This indicated to me that Sheryl believed her methodology was good for groups regardless of their purpose and training stage.

Prior to everyone's arrival, Sheryl displayed large posters, one of which was to be the group's focus question. "In what ways do students at [this school]

show evidence of using their minds in the area of literacy that promotes life-long learning?" Later I saw her display similar guiding posters for a regional training session and a leadership team meeting. It interested me that even though this group consisted of colleagues and other previously trained persons, Sheryl continually modeled what she considers best consulting practices. Watching this took me back to her interview where she said, "Every time they interact with us, they know what to expect." In six observations, I never saw her even momentarily lay down the modeler mantle.

Sheryl's methods appeared to revolve around setting a positive tone whenever possible. She reminded this group (I named them the B & B Team) that the upcoming event was celebratory and their task was not to criticize, but to "celebrate the evidence." She said they would develop questions that the school "might use to go forward," which seemed a positive spin on identifying areas where they need to improve. In another leadership team meeting, she invited attendees to not only talk about their school's improvement accomplishments, but to post them on the walls from where Sheryl read them in a complimentary manner. Thus, in one activity, in three different ways, attendees affirmed their progress.

As the B & B Team session opened, Sheryl did not launch into a description of the upcoming celebratory event in which they were about to participate. Instead, she asked attendees to write down and then tell what about this experience they anticipated would benefit them. They took quite a while to finish and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to link this two-day activity back to



their regular school work. Later I asked Sheryl why she devoted so much time to this, especially since some late arrivals and lengthy bed and breakfast check-ins had delayed her start. She explained,

It just seems to be a good way to—it's almost like an anticipatory set I suppose. But instead of me giving them the context of what the next couple of days are going to be, it's a way of setting the stage, but it's using what's relevant and pertinent to them. So much of it is philosophy that's tied to how one believes people learn. Our approach is not about spoon feeding, behavior modification, reward and punishment. It's a lot more about facilitating people to kind of make their own meaning of the experience.

Sheryl's desire to have everyone around her—whether it's colleagues or school personnel in training, or persons investigating her model—"make their own meaning of the experience" was evident whenever I shadowed her. She modeled this method during a conference workshop that she conducted where attendees found three wall posters displaying positive statements. At three different times during her presentation, they walked to the room's left, center, or right aisles to indicate degrees of agreement with those statements. Sheryl encouraged everyone to explain their stance from the viewpoint of personal experience. During the bed and breakfast session, I noticed that participants seemed to thrive in climate that honored their history. They frequently related what they were about to experience at the school about to be visited with their home schools. The frequent bouncing back and forth between their current

pending experiences appeared to energize them and maintain interest in the task ahead.

Another method highly evident during my shadowings was Sheryl's deliberate transference of problem and solution ownership from herself to clients. During a school's leadership team meeting, she stood only to open the meeting and then joined attendees at the table. She reminded them that goals belonged to their school, not to her and asked what support they anticipated wanting from her during the upcoming school year. During a workshop panel discussion, school representatives noted that she sat *with* them while they wrote the grant proposal, analyzed data, developed an action plan, and decided when to call in outside help, but that at the end of the day the decisions were theirs.

Sheryl's intention to leave ownership with clients extended to the way she responded when she detected less than stellar performance. After the B & B Team completed their preparation, we traveled to the school they had come to observe. An evening event celebrating school improvement was underway. Following a spaghetti supper served by staff and students, Sheryl and I walked the building observing displayed student art work, fine arts performances, and a science fair. The following morning we toured classrooms. Throughout this intense focus upon school improvement, we saw many examples of student accomplishments. We also saw several indications that teaching might improve. For example, while watching a high school math class, we observed disengaged students conversing with each other. Out in the hall a colleague from Sheryl's consulting team commented that she didn't even like to visit that classroom. Still

the two women agreed that perhaps kids can learn in that environment and even I recalled that a student whom Sheryl interviewed reported this to be his favorite class. While visiting a high school literature class, we noted a bulletin board devoted completely to insulting words used by Shakespeare, some of which were vulgar. As we talked later while walking down the hall, Sheryl agreed with my suggestion that teachers should elevate students' thinking levels above insult and vulgarity, but only in the most general terms. She said nothing to indicate that moral standards in teaching were within the parameter of her consulting. While touring the science fair we saw evidence of reporting rather than experimentation and on labels and papers accompanying displays, we noted absence of punctuation, poor grammar, and misspellings. We attended a reading theater performance where students simply read their work with no stage presence, leaving me to question whether there was, in fact, any teaching of stage techniques. She acknowledged that she had seen what I had observed, but she did not say that she would be talking about this with the staff. I am not suggesting that Sheryl never discusses quality teaching with school leaders, since I'm convinced that this is an important issue with her. However, she conveyed the impression to me that during this particular on-site visit with its celebration theme, she would not be sidetracked into criticism. Her behavior reminded me of the question that she had posted earlier that day at the bed and breakfast for the B & B Team. "In what ways do students show evidence of using their minds...that promotes life-long learning?" She also notified the team that before the two-day event ended, they would draw upon their observations to

“develop questions that [the school] might use to go forward.” I saw that as a positive spin on identifying areas in need of improvement. It seemed as though Sheryl was determined that everything she did and said during this two-day achievement celebration would be positive and complimentary.

In another instance prior to a leadership team meeting with a different school, Sheryl’s colleague told me that this school was “going to receive a strong message that their data was not showing enough improvement.” However, during the meeting data analysis was tabled when confusion arose around dates posted on the data, so I was unable to observe Sheryl in a more directive role. Through six shadowings in six separate settings, I never saw Sheryl step out of a positive, complimentary mode. Yet, during her interviews she indicated a resolute determination that her client schools would implement long-lasting improvement initiatives. I concluded that Sheryl was firmly planted in her belief that if she arranged scenarios in which school staff could self-analyze, develop problem-solving constructs, and take ownership of decisions, then over time school improvement would follow.

### *Shadowing Yvonne*

Shadowing Yvonne offered me the opportunity to watch a consultant pass through a series of connected events. I first watched her lay the groundwork for a major intervention on behalf of one district’s students by sharing district history with a team whom she had called together to serve as diagnosticians. Next, I shadowed her through a building tour followed by observations and interviews with staff members. I listened as her intervention team met off-site to diagnose

the district's condition. Finally, I attended the meeting where they confronted district leaders and informed stakeholders of their findings.

The district under scrutiny was a small urban district with one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. At issue were low student achievement scores on the state standardized assessment, and of special concern was the fact that every building in the district failed that year to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) according to No Child Left Behind guidelines.

The diagnostic team, led by Yvonne, consisted of representatives from her state department of education, her regional education division, and colleagues with whom she regularly works. They first met in the morning at a site removed from the target district. Yvonne was clearly well prepared for this meeting. She presented an oral history of the district while guiding the team through history charts that she distributed. Prior to the meeting, she had explained to me why she wanted to open with a history lesson.

You have to have some history before you go in. I mean you need to know why you need to be there in the first place. And fortunately because I work with the department of education, I have access to all kinds of data bases, and I did preliminary meetings with the school district to pull together an administrative history on the school and make sure I knew all the different initiatives that have already been in the district and failed.

While noting the district's inability to sustain improvement initiatives, she explained that this district had changed its grade structure and/or its administrators every year for some time. She said several times that she doesn't

trust leaders from this district to follow state guidelines even though she is in the building very often. She doubts they are notifying parents that they have the right to transfer their children out of the district since adequate yearly progress is not being made. She is quite certain funds intended for supplemental services to underachieving students are being diverted into other uses. She said the poor use of metal detectors at entrances is symbolic of the school's unwise use of money, and she described seeing adults "standing around, visiting, and just waving kids through" when the detector beeped.

Yvonne facilitated the ensuing discussion and explained what would happen that afternoon. She distributed forms showing questions the team would use later during staff interviews. She had clustered them in six areas: curriculum, school improvement, grant programs, service coordination, professional development, and parent involvement. Yvonne and the team decided who would focus on each area. Before breaking for lunch, Yvonne urged team members to be alert for details, to "ask the hard questions," and not to be taken in by positive words said by district staff.

After lunch, the team met at the district campus where I shadowed Yvonne while she observed classrooms, studied bulletin boards, and talked with students. She asked how long they had attended this school, how long they had been working on today's topic, whether they had textbooks. If they told her they took the state assessment, she asked if anyone told them how they did on it. When she happened to sit next to a student who appeared disconnected from class, she observed the teacher for awhile and then turned to the student and

began a quiet conversation. Sitting in front of her, I could barely hear her words, but I heard enough to know she was learning that he did no school work either in class or at home and that he found school quite meaningless. Yvonne managed to keep the boy responding to her for about five minutes. Later while reporting to staff on other matters, she made an impassioned plea for this boy, asking that someone look after him. At the time of this shadowing, I had not yet heard Yvonne's story about her own elementary days when no teacher or family member helped her believe in herself until a compassionate sixth grade teacher convinced her that she was smart and capable. Those moments in the classroom watching her try to reach this seemingly depressed boy are especially poignant in retrospect.

(Some weeks later I would receive the following from Yvonne which she recorded on tape and mailed to me.)

I think it's really important to show an individual interest in a kid, especially a kid who is right on the edge or struggling and letting the kid hear how he or she is doing and explaining what the test scores are telling us about them and how close they can be to getting even higher scores and what those scores could mean to them as an individual. And I'm not talking about a goofy assembly. I mean really showing an interest in the individual child. I just don't think schools do enough of that. We teach them how to use rubrics to judge their writing and the writing of others. Why on earth can't we teach them how to understand what their grades and test scores

mean and what we're finding out about them? If anybody should know, they should know.

After Yvonne completed her classroom observations, she interviewed the assistant principal and then the interim principal asking four times that they speak honestly and forthrightly. Both administrators relayed alarming stories of poor classroom management, student misbehavior, and lack of instructional leadership. A small "cabinet" around the superintendent makes all decisions and does not invite principals to their meetings. This group chose a math textbook, but teachers don't know how to use it. These two principals claimed that most teachers introduce a lesson in five minutes and then hand out dittoes. Some teachers refuse to attend professional development days calling in sick or extending vacation time instead. They reported being overwhelmed and, along with teachers, needing direction, leadership, and support. They wanted a principal who would commit to staying for three years.

The next morning Yvonne and her team held a group interview with teachers and support staff. She encouraged everyone to speak freely and tell the truth, pointing out that they might not get another opportunity like this one. She said, "These are critical times." As the group interview proceeded, Yvonne pushed hard, making it clear she wanted clarification about school climate and teachers' pedagogy. People in attendance told about being physically and verbally assaulted and sworn at by students. Although the assistant principal had told Yvonne that 98% of his time is spent on discipline, this group reported that some students have 70 and more documented behavior incidents, but "nothing is



done.” They said they were told it was illegal for them to know which kids were in Special Ed. They were not invited to meetings where educational plans were written and were never told how to accommodate such students. They said that no administrator attended their school improvement meetings, but that they enjoyed their absence. They expressed need for a curriculum director who could help new teachers teach. Computers in the media center where we met “are useless. There is no printer.” Finally, one teacher burst out, “We are starving for leadership!”

Yvonne’s diagnostic team then withdrew from campus and discussed their findings over lunch. They prepared for their final meeting where attendees would include teachers, building level administrators, the superintendent, the board, and parents.

From the moment that Yvonne opened this meeting, she was in charge. She explained that each team member would address one area of concern. They did, speaking articulately about what they had discovered about this district. Finally it was Yvonne’s turn. She stood, and it was immediately clear that she was a woman on a mission. In a ringing, challenging tone she delivered her diagnosis followed by forcefully worded recommendations. “Everyone in this room is at fault—the board, teachers, parents, and administration,” she declared. “You must stop this annual change of principals, this leadership revolving door.” She spoke for about thirty minutes, maintaining eye contact with her captive audience, never changing her stance, her voice never wavering.

She urged them to utilize assessments, reveal facts, do research, collect data, and make objective data-driven decisions. She recommended that climate issues and student behavior be assigned a dedicated team. She explained what they needed to do in order to ensure that “teachers are teaching what they are supposed to be teaching and kids are learning what they need to be learning!” She criticized their handling of the math program and charged them with transitioning students seamlessly from elementary to middle school. She directed them to develop a meaningful improvement plan created jointly with administration, parents, and teachers, and in so doing to make sure that grant funded supplemental services reach at risk students. She spotlighted the number of hours teachers are required to be on task annually and recommended that 40 hours be invested in professional development. She urged administrators to treat parents as students’ first teachers and to view them as a valued asset. She castigated teachers for the appearance of classrooms and ordered leaders, “List classes and rooms. Visit those rooms when they are empty. Sit in a student’s chair and look around. Could you sit there and feel interested and motivated?” Finally, she encouraged them to find some successes and publicize and celebrate them.

Yvonne’s audience was silent. The superintendent sat with his head down, looking at the table top during her entire lecture. Others stared raptly at her, often nodding in agreement. When the meeting ended, I spoke to the district parent teacher organization president. He expressed his gratitude for the meeting. “The

parents and I have told the board everything they said tonight and have gotten nowhere. We're tired."

Following this meeting, I accompanied Yvonne to her car. She seemed exhausted and worried about what was to come next. She spoke briefly about facing anger when she returned to meet non-publicly with district leaders. Although the window of time set aside for interviews closed soon after this shadowing, I called Yvonne months later to ask if she had seen a change in this district. She cheerfully reported that there had been much progress. The meeting had generated a flurry of phone calls to Yvonne from parents, board members, and teachers. A principal and several curriculum coaches had been hired, and she was consulting with them often. She had helped them write a new district action plan and begin its implementation. Teachers were responding positively to instructional leadership. Although everyone knows that it will be a year or more before they see movement in their assessment scores, Yvonne and district stakeholders are encouraged.

This experience demonstrates a broad panorama of educational consultant obligations. From detailed behind-the-scenes research, to diagnostic team preparation, through observations and interviews, to final diagnosis and delivery, Yvonne displayed constant alert sensitivity and communication. She was high energy packaged and aimed toward improved student achievement.

In the next section, consultants acknowledge barriers that sometimes impede the implementation of initiatives they are shepherding through school systems. Resistance affects the climate, and it can seldom be ignored.

### **Methods Employed When Working with Resisters**

As the study participants told how they deal with resistant principals and teachers, they described multiple methods. They spoke of ways to confront resisters, ways to convert them into contributors, and ways to bypass them when necessary. Throughout their discussions of methods, the consultants maintained a tone of practicality. Resistance seemed to be just one component of their multifaceted career, worthy of no more or less attention than others.

#### ***Consultants Attempt to Understand Resisters***

Sheryl tries to maintain respect for resisters by understanding what is provoking their attitude, and she notes, "There has been recent study that sometimes your resisters or cynics are your idealists who are so disappointed that they're just going to react that way. If you can strike a cord with them at some point, then they will just really come around." She gave an example from a day when she was asked to keynote a professional development event.

There was one individual there who kept challenging me. His whole approach was, "Been there, done that, and it just got abandoned. So what's going to be different about this?" I respected his comments and I responded as honestly as I could about what I felt were the factors that would be different this time. What he was doing really was reacting to some contextual things in his district that would make you skeptical, would make you cynical. It happened that I had a lot of background knowledge about that particular community and district, and maybe I wouldn't have

taken it personally anyway. I'm not sure. As it's turned out he is one of our supporters now, and he's highly influential in his school. He's a very bright individual. He embraces the change and improvement.

Yvonne's attitude toward resistance was similar to Sheryl's. When I asked if she ever found resistance useful, she responded, "Oh, very definitely. By continuing to ask why, or why do you suppose, or what can you tell me about that, you uncover a lot of stories and soon you can pretty much tell what's based on facts." Yvonne then related an incident where a staff insisted that their low scores were caused by high numbers of students transferring in and out of their district.

Everybody telling me, "Oh, these kids. They move in. They move out." And yet when I got the numbers and used the student record data base, it wasn't true. I had to very respectfully bring it back to them and say, yes, I do see we have some movement; however, look at what I'm finding out when we look at these kids over the course of a couple of years. We're not really losing as many kids as you think. And most of the children that are new to the school are performing better than the kids that have been here over a longer time. What do you suppose that's all about?

So little by little you get the point across that we're not going to use that as an excuse any more, because I'm showing you it's not real. It takes people a long time to let go of things that they've bought into emotionally. There's not anything you can do about it. You just have to keep repeating the facts. So, yes, having the conversations and spending time observing

and listening and getting them involved in meetings and having opportunities for input, you pick up whether you like it or not or whether it's healthy opinions and beliefs or not. At least you start to discover what they are.

When I asked Eve about methods she uses in the face of resistance, I triggered a lengthy response. Her reaction was born from her prior experience as an administrator in the large urban district that made such remarkable progress under the leadership of Eve and her central office colleagues. In that setting, Eve apparently had ample opportunity to hone her methods for coping with resistance. Because she presents such a compelling account about how resisters can be helped, I offer her account in its entirety.

If a principal sets a tone and establishes a belief system, then everyone in that building is responsible for what they do for kids. That's generally where I put it. It's always about, "So tell me, what is it that you don't want to do for kids? What is it that you think these kids should be getting if the children next door are getting this and these children aren't?" It's about kids. People can't really argue when you put the kids in the picture. Let's take a look at the data and let's take a look at the history of this child's data for the four or five years that they've been in this school. Let's just see where they are. What have they gotten over the last four or five years that they've been in this school, and is this what we're going to say to them that they can expect for the next four or five years?

It's the kids. I mean we're there for the kids. It's not about the teacher. It is about the kids. Very often that's forgotten. Part of the leadership stuff I do with principals is to make children first and foremost in their conversation. And you're hard pressed as a teacher. I mean you'll look pretty foolish when that's given. In my district at the end of the year when we would have summer school, for example, it would be for the kids who were mostly at risk usually and students who were in danger of being held over. We would have the teachers fill out a profile on the students and part of the profile asked who their teachers were since they entered school in kindergarten. What services have they received and who the teachers were who provided those services. Who the teacher will be the following year should they be promoted, and if they were to be held over what is the plan that will be done differently for this child if he is held over? So every teacher is accountable.

Let's just say, for example, that if there were 23,000 kids in my district and 22,500 were proficient, my superintendent would never ever ask about those kids. He would only ask us about the 500 kids that were still struggling and why were they still struggling and what were we going to do about it. If there were three kids still struggling, we would have the same conversation. He was a person who believed that every student has the right to the best education you can possibly give them. And we had to live and breathe that.

So there was no resistance from teachers. "You want to work here? This is your philosophy. If it's not your philosophy, you don't work here." Now I know that's not a thing everyone can do. But it is something that can be established from the top and I mean from the superintendent. It's a belief system. This is what our school district was about. And everyone in this district had a responsibility for delivering! It's not like you can accept mediocre. I told teachers and principals, "If you are mediocre I have a support for you. You had better take advantage of it. That's the bottom line."

As Ann talked about how she handles resisters, she named multiple methods, some of them preventative. During the opening moments of team meetings, she asks, "Okay, what is our purpose today, our intent? I try to get folks to understand our goals and objectives for the day and make sure everyone is clear about why we're here and what we're trying to do." Then as conversation proceeds, she returns the group to that purpose as often as necessary, asking, "Does this have something to do with our purpose today? Who is it serving? What is it about?" Reaching a point of agreement first and then maintaining focus upon that point avoids some resistance. However, when Ann does run into full blown resistance, she stops the meeting to address it. "If a person in the meeting is resistant but not talking about it, but you're picking up on it, ask for a check in. How is everyone feeling about what we've done so far? Do a round robin thing."



There are some situations in which Ann would consider asking a resister to leave the team. I described a summer school planning session in which I once participated. Although principals were asked to contribute team members who were summer school enthusiasts, one participant continually resisted the concept. Ann's response was that first she would find out whether this person's principal supported summer school and second she would ask the teacher, "If they have something they want to contribute in support of the summer school. Maybe they would have some good ideas. If not, would they like to stay or be excused since they are being counter-productive."

#### *Consultants Find Circuitous Paths around Resistant Principals*

Ed's method for working with resisters, especially resistant principals, actually was more like working around them.

When I'm confronted with people like that, I just look for other sources of leadership. And then I just make sure that whatever is important to that principal, I don't step on so that I don't have an enemy. But then I get the job done through other informal leaders like the department chair or the school improvement chair. There are always two or three strong teacher leaders on a faculty. And you just cultivate them and you work through them. And by and large those strong teachers have learned how to work with poor and ineffective principals. So I would tend to capitalize on that.

Eve explained how she copes when she runs into a principal who does not understand school improvement.

In some cases you really feel like you are banging your head against the wall. In other cases, if you can find like minded individuals or at least people that aspire to improve and recognize that the most critical element in school improvement is teaching and instructional practice, then you can find that kind of core people that you can start to work with. You need that critical mass of people that are aligned with it. I've worked in schools where the principal didn't get it and most of the staff members didn't get it. But the fact was there were maybe six staff members who kind of just were like sponges, so that what we had to offer as an organization and what I had to offer as an individual made it worth while.

Yvonne also weaves her way around resistant principals without closing the door to a productive working relationship with them.

What I have found is that it's that lead, follow, or get out of the way kind of thing. You always have to be respectful of that individual's position.

Sometimes you're just not going to get anywhere with somebody. They don't want to cooperate; they don't like you for whatever reason; they don't want you there. So you have to find out where is it that you can have some impact and be able to facilitate something positive that will get this place moving in the right direction with or without this person. So it may mean that you have to work around that person and work more directly with teachers and in setting up programs for parents and for parents and students in spite of this individual, while always trying to include them and be respectful of them.

I asked Yvonne how she manages to meet with teachers if the principal isn't supportive of their leaving classrooms to keep appointments.

Well, they can make it very difficult. Yeah, that's where you have to really play it cool. It's a tough one, because there are some who just don't want you there or no matter how many times you've shared a description of your duties or whatever, they just see you as somebody who should be their step and fetch it person. And that's not what you're hired to do. Everybody wants this stuff, but when it comes down to how it's going to impact them and the way they do things and cause them to have to change something, all of a sudden it's not fun anymore.

Yvonne reported that occasionally her circuitous route around resistant principals takes her to the superintendent and back again to the principal. She said,

I have to take a look at the principal, the building leadership if I'm going into a school, or with the superintendent. I have to read them all. I could have a very different relationship in one building than I would in another.

But overall I still have to keep in the back of my mind that I'm dealing with the superintendent and the board as well. I'll give you an example.

Yvonne then described a principal in whom she was disappointed, because the principal arranged meetings where Yvonne would work with her staff, but then didn't attend herself even when the topic was vital such as administration of a state assessment test with which the principal had little experience. Yvonne was annoyed that the principal announced that she wouldn't attend two hours before

the meeting and left Yvonne “making excuses for why she wasn’t there when she’s supposed to be the one that makes the building level decisions.” This principal did this repeatedly and then wanted Yvonne to “chase her down and bring her up to speed.” Yvonne doubted that she would receive assistance from the superintendent, so she handled it herself.

I had to work with that principal and I will tell you it wasn’t a pleasant meeting. I didn’t get mad. I just stayed direct. “You weren’t there. This is what you have to do. You weren’t there. You picked the date. You picked the appointment. You weren’t there.” Just stick to the facts. You have to know what’s right. You have to draw on your own personal experience where you know you go in there and say I’m going to meet with resistance, but I know this is the right thing to do. I know what’s right and what’s not right to do. And I know what’s professional and not professional.

And so when you go in to work someplace, as far as the posture you take, you have to figure out are you going to be supported or aren’t you. It’s the same thing I said earlier. Lead, follow, or get out of the way. If people aren’t going to work with you or fight you, you have to work around them. You can’t waste your time trying to bring someone on board who doesn’t want to be brought on. You have to work with the people who do want to. On a case like I just described you have to do what the teachers need.

I asked Yvonne if she very often finds that a principal would like to work with her more but isn't getting support from the superintendent.

I would say that would be more likely to happen in my state [department of education] job where you have superintendents and central office administrators and business managers who don't want the state buttin' in too much. So they might limit the principal or program director who would like you to come and help teachers more often.

Yvonne then reported that a new program director from one of her district schools has found discrepancies between legislative mandates and her district's program implementation. She would like to correct the situation, but is experiencing resistance and even anger from the superintendent. Yvonne continued,

And so I do see things like that and I feel very sad for people who want to do the right thing. I think there are superintendents and other central office administrators out there who think they shouldn't have to follow anybody else's rules, and they don't want the state coming in and telling them what they can and cannot do. So that's when it's hard for someone like a program director who wants to do the right thing, who knows what the legislation says they're supposed to do but is up against other people who have been there longer saying we want to do it our own way, rules or no rules. That's been a real tough thing.

Yvonne's normal methods to deal with resistance do not extend to such situations. She and the program director agreed that the director's job might be

jeopardized if the superintendent learns that a state consultant has been notified. As our interviews concluded, this situation had not been resolved.

When Sheryl talked of resistance matters, she told about a speaker whose thoughts about resistors inspired her.

I remember him saying that you don't put resources and energy into those folks. Why energize them with your energy? You allow them to dissent.

You try to neutralize any kind of sabotage and you put the resources and the energy into those folks who are going to embrace it and [also] the wait and see people. You get that critical mass going. I think it's very difficult for us to do that. I think teachers and educators generally want to fix it.

I asked Sheryl if she meant that she would literally end her interchange with the resister and turn toward other people. She replied that she "would be very sensitive with where's the group with this." She would try to discern whether the resister is annoying team members. If not, then she would say something like, "We really have to be mindful of our time and our agenda here and the outcomes. I'll be happy to sit down and talk with you and anybody else that's expressing the same concerns that you are. Maybe we could do that after the session, and I'll come over any time. And here's my email address." Sheryl said that through those words, she signals the group that she is moving them forward in spite of resistance. However, she tries to maintain a tone that she says matches her philosophy.

"We have to always be respectful. We have to always be invitational. But we also have to be very firm about saying we respect how you feel and the position

that you're taking, but the rest of us are moving on. Any time you want to join us that's great."

Ed works primarily with improvement teams, so his success rests partly in their ability to carry his message to the total staff. I asked whether he cares whether everyone on the core team is in agreement. "Oh a bit, because you cannot get active, enthusiastic implementation unless everybody's on board. So I care very much. Sure. If you leave it 70-30 or 50-50 even, you've got an ineffective program and there will be ineffective implementation." His response led to the following exchange.

I asked, "Does it sometimes require quite an expenditure of energy on your part to walk out of a room having gotten everybody on board?"

Ed responded, "Uh, it depends on the mix. If it's 50-50, yeah, it would take a little bit of work. If it were 70-30 not as much work, because you can quickly unearth what the issues are. And they can be as trivial as well nobody really asked me what I thought or as serious as people are starting to divide and there are issues that they aren't really willing to confront."

"Then when you see division happening in front of your eyes, do you turn deliberately to the people that are on board and try to access their help with these resisters, or do you handle the resisters pretty much alone?"

"It's a group process, but I don't turn to anyone and say well you people are on board. Help me get them. It's got to be the larger group establishing its own understanding. So I just simply ask questions of the entire group. "I've got a sense here that we're not all on board. I wonder what that's about. I wonder if

anybody has a thought about that.” Then I move to the flip chart. “Here are the agreements we reached last time. What’s happened in the time between?” In my experience, it doesn’t take long to do that. I don’t think so. Not if you’re already at a session where you’re developing an action plan or developing things that everyone’s going to do. By then you’ve kind of got a lot of those hesitancies out of the way.”

I questioned him further. “Do you ever under any circumstances mentally abandon one person in the room and figure they’re a lost cause and just turn all of your energy to everybody else in the room? Do you ever do that?”

He answered, “I have in the past. I call it going with the horses. But I’ve also learned over the years that it’s not a good thing. There’s a reason why this person might be hesitant or hanging back or folding their arms. So the challenge is to figure out why.”

“Do they inform the group about something the group wasn’t thinking of when they were enthusiastically going along?”

Ed hesitated, “Umm, I don’t think I can answer that. The only way I can answer that is to—member one of Schein’s principles is everything is data including feelings. And if you get the data out, that’s new data to the group. So in that sense, yeah, they are informing the group of something new even though it’s their own feelings.”

### *Consultants Help Principals Deal with Resistant Teachers*

Some years prior to beginning this research I had known an elementary principal who was seriously intimidated by a teacher who repeatedly filed union



grievances whenever the principal tried to initiate change. So I was eager to ask these consultants how they would help a principal similarly intimidated. I began with Eve.

Well, you know it's not like a one-word answer. I really have to watch the person and see what the behaviors are and see why they're intimidated by the staff. What's going on there? Do they not feel prepared or as smart as? Have they not planned well enough or are they not sure enough about the direction they want to go? There could be a lot of reasons and I sort of have to live in the situation for awhile and monitor it to see what's going on. There are a lot of principals, too, who once they are principals realize this isn't really the place for me. So there's really no clean answer for that. You really have to read the situations as they arise and try to figure out how are you going to support this person?

Eve's method for helping principals face resistance is to suggest methods they might use to penetrate it. She recommends letters from the principal to faculty describing beliefs, expectations, and hopes. She also urges principals to conduct professional development during the day or arrange an extra preparation period for those who participate after school hours. She suggests that principals buy lunch or find other ways to recognize work above the norm. She continued,

Another way is that you need to be very, very visible. You need to be around the school a lot and you need to be commenting in positive ways about what you're seeing happening in the classroom and at the same

time guiding toward the next step. If you're not visible all the time, people are saying, why is he or she in my room? What is he trying to prove?

You're very much a part of this community of learners. You need to sit with teachers in the workshops when they go places so you're learning along side them. You're not the absentee person expecting them to do all the learning and you're not.

So there are a lot of ways in which you begin to develop a trusting relationship with your staff—one where they view you as rolling up your sleeves and working right alongside them. And then you need to be around so you can see and talk and comment on how the professional development is being implemented.

When you get those people who don't want to give you any extra time, you may very often have to have a conversation and say, we've been participating in x, y, and z professional development because we truly believe and have seen that research says this is supporting better literacy for students. And so if you're not able to stay for this professional development, tell me how you're going to get it so that when I walk into your classroom I'm going to see in this grade what I'm seeing next door to you. Basically what you're saying is okay you don't want to participate, but you're still responsible for it.

I asked Eve if, after giving a principal these ideas she returns to check on their progress. She replied,

Oh, yes, generally when I'm on contract to support principals it's a year long contract and depending on what's available in terms of money it will be anywhere from twice a month to four times a month. So, yes, there's follow through. A principal really needs to be supported for a period of time depending on where they are in this process.

Examination of the consultants' collective responses to my resistance inquiries reveals multiple approaches. For the most part these consultants seek detours around resisters and find alternate persons with whom they can continue to serve client schools. They avoid making enemies of resisters through good faith efforts to address concerns. No consultant implied that resistance presents good reason for quitting. They seemed to accept it as a normal aspect of their work, but they also viewed it in a positive light as proof that they had skills to overcome obstacles.

The consultants who participated in this study described methods they use at every stage of their school partnerships from initial contacts to celebratory closure events. They also explained how they consult with individuals (usually principals) and teacher groups (sometimes leadership teams and other times professional learning communities). No consultant ever suggested that any one method culminates in systemic school improvement. Instead they acknowledged that multiple methods applied over time are required. As Eve said, "Very often it takes two or three years before you actually begin to see any change because of all the groundwork that has to take place."

This chapter completes my data analysis. We have examined commendable consultants' beliefs about their partnerships with schools, factors of school life that impact consultants' ability to effect change, roles consultants fulfill while consulting, and finally their methods. The next and final chapter offers conclusions and examines implications of this research.

## CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the absence of substantive research on external school consulting, this dissertation should be viewed as an early contributor to research literature which reveals the nature and importance of consultants and school-consultant partnerships. This dissertation has situated education consulting in the context of schools responding to community, state, and federal mandates for school reform, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB brings enormous challenges to many schools since its premise is that every child will learn state standards in core subjects. This legislation mandates comprehensive systems of standards, testing, and accountability and then gives sanctions through withdrawal of federal funds, mandated school improvement, public school choice, and the possibility of privatization. If adequate yearly progress (AYP) is not made for 2 consecutive years, schools must create and implement a school improvement plan and receive extended services. Since nationally approximately 26% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) of schools are presently failing to make adequate yearly progress and many are seeking technical support, the role of the external educational consultant has greatly expanded. As I have detailed earlier, there is little research on this role and this dissertation breaks new ground.

In this chapter I review my findings on the essence of commendable consultants. I describe the ability of the consultants whom I studied to integrate their multiple abilities and form whole characters infused with strength to perform consistently while constantly changing work venues. Next, I situate my findings in

literature. Given the dearth of school consultant literature, I consider my findings in light of school reform, school administration, and corporate consulting literature. Although educational reform and leadership literature does not necessarily address the external consultant's role, it does identify factors essential to school reform as well as skills needed by administrators who tackle school change. Corporate consulting literature provides valuable insight into consulting skills also highlighted in my findings, notably the ability to exchange trust with clients and to transfer knowledge to clients. I then explain implications in my findings for consultants, administrators, and teachers, all of whom share a mutual obligation to contribute to their school-consultant partnerships. Implications center on consultants' and educators' responsibility to partner with each other wisely and somewhat humbly. Finally, I discuss my study's limitations given its small sample size and propose additional research of school-consultant partnerships giving voice also to administrators and teachers.

### A Review of Key Findings

Throughout a school-consultant partnership's duration, consultants come and go regularly, continually interacting with school staff who may or may not welcome their presence. They interpret legislative and policy demands for school personnel, teach change mechanisms to leaders, monitor change progress, and shore up weakened confidence. Through this study, they explained that everything they do and all they are able to accomplish is impacted by their school partners' attitudes toward change, understanding of school improvement process, ability to engage, and willingness to learn. Consultants work in semi-

obscurity, sometimes (but not always) undervalued by administrators and misunderstood by teachers and virtually unknown to students and parents. This study found that although the five consultants who participated in this research project regularly interpret legislative and policy demands for school staff, they rarely describe for the community what occurs inside high needs schools.

Members of the greater community—policy makers advocating change, overseers of funds for change endeavors, providers of change models, parents hoping for better schools, and educator practitioners facing change—all need to hear the consultants' stories. By investigating commendable consultants' perspectives of school-consultant partnerships, this dissertation has addressed this need.

### *Consultants Are Diplomats*

I have asserted that my research gave unaccustomed voice to five consultants who during interviews sounded willing and often eager to tell their stories. Fortunately, in the telling they also illuminated themselves, allowing me a long look into the hearts and minds of highly commended consultants. I found, in a word, diplomats. Their unique service to troubled schools lies most centrally in their ability to hold onto a consistent vision of student success while stepping in and out of school cultures and avoiding being swept away by clients' emotions or in-house political maneuverings. These five consultants are constantly in motion. Only occasionally are they in one school two days running and they sometimes see two schools in one day. The challenge posed by this motion is more complicated than changing parking lots. Having entered a school building, they

may counsel privately in the principal's office, conduct teacher leader workshops in set aside rooms, observe teaching and learning in classrooms, and study staff-student relationships in hallways, playgrounds, and lunchrooms. In every setting, while meeting and interacting with different people, they stay on alert, rapidly determining how each new contact might fit into the initiative they came to establish.

I discovered that consultants' diplomacy is tested in every venue, not because they confront challenges wherever they go, but because the vision of student success held close to their hearts must constantly be nurtured toward fruition amidst varying administrators and teachers and resources. I think of a weaver passing from loom to loom, holding a single precious thread in her shuttle, trying to decide how to weave it permanently into each developing tapestry. This weaving of something lasting and valued (which is their career mission) into the fabric of schools' cultures marks the consultants' uniqueness. Unlike more traditional educators, their vision of success features students whom they seldom meet, and they play out their career missions among mere acquaintances or even strangers.

This study found that commendable consultants integrate multiple abilities, and they each have formed a strong, whole character capable of withstanding client resistance while patiently restoring client confidence and courage. These qualities of character mean that they are self-sustainable, in possession of all the skills and experience they need wherever they go. Their ability to maintain singleness of purpose in the face of their revolving-door associations with clients



is similar to what is depicted in Cloud's (2006) view of integrity which he wrote in reflection on those who are successful in business and medical fields.

When we are talking about integrity, we are talking about being a whole person, an integrated person, with all of our different parts working well and delivering the functions that they were designed to deliver. It is about wholeness and effectiveness as people. (p. 31)

### *Consultants Model Character Integrity*

While explaining his interpretation of integrity, Cloud compares a person's contribution over time to a ship's wake. There are two sides to the wake: the task—what was accomplished, and the relationships—how interactions affected others. The entire wake, but especially the relationship side, is affected by integrity or "wholeness of character" (p. 34). Abilities to gain trust, recognize reality, get results, handle negativity, create growth, and join a larger mission (p.35) are integrated to form a whole character. My research found the five consultants whom I studied modeling Cloud's concept of integrated character wholeness. They told about efforts they make during initial visits to understand clients' cultures, thus signaling their desire to join schools' missions. They described their resolute command of administrator and teacher negativity and realistically discussed other challenges that hinder their work while sounding stalwart in their determination to get results for students. Finally, they told about efforts to gain and maintain clients' trust beginning with initial visits and continuing through closure celebrations. In revealing consultants' integration of

multiple abilities through which they cope with the unknown in new client schools, this study spotlighted consultants' wholeness of character.

*Consultants Give a Gift.*

I have come to value the consultants' voices. Drawing upon memory, I listen to Ed's bold confidence, Eve's thoughtful analysis, Ann's kind portrayals, Sheryl's empathetic realism, and Yvonne's compassionate challenges. Through careful listening, I have understood that these commendable consultants give to their school partners a gift not specifically mentioned during interviews.

Transcripts and shadowing notes indicate it may never have occurred to them that they bestow upon administrators and teachers the gift of courage. Although they spoke of modeling certain behaviors for principals and teacher leaders, my study revealed that they do more than model techniques. They model courageous leadership. "Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles" (Kotter, 1996, p. 25).

Bellman (2002) suggests that consultants' clients sometimes hesitate to act upon recommendations because obstacles make them feel helpless, and they hope that something external to themselves might change first.

Furthermore, it is commonly said that leadership is lonely and that leaders, therefore, need great individual courage to lead well. However, this research found that commendable consultants offer to school leaders a radically different version of leadership, one that calls for a new application of courage. They help administrators step out of their isolation and join teachers for the purpose of

learning collaboratively. They ask them to be courageous enough to admit that they need to better understand how students learn and how teachers should teach. In other words, they help leaders develop courage to become vulnerable. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do" (Roosevelt, n.d.). The interviewed consultants challenged administrators and teacher leaders to do what they think they cannot do in tandem with and in open view of teachers. This finding suggests that courageous leadership could propel schools toward being true learning organizations where everyone of every age and position would go to school to learn.

In his book, *The Consultant's Calling* (2002), Bellman reminds consultants, "The willingness of our clients to choose courage is what makes our recommendations actionable and addresses our longing to be relevant and useful" (p. xvi). This study highlighted the five consultants' desire to treat consulting as a calling. Yes, their resolute determination to succeed professionally is understandable, because achievement has distinguished their entire careers. But I have seen that their true joy rests in guiding others to success, first educators and ultimately students.

### **My Findings on Consulting in View of the Research Literature**

Literature searches that I conducted in preparation for this study exposed a lack of research on school-consultant partnering. I could find no literature devoted to how consultants and schools work together and little about educational consultants as pivotal players for school reform. One exception is a

monograph published by Boud (1981), but it addresses consulting in higher education rather than in my study venue, K-12 schools. As I described in Chapter 5, literature searches using the keywords *school consultant* or *educational consultant* led to books and journal articles about classroom management, school counseling, or special education, but not to pieces on external consultants' contribution to school reform. Given the dearth of school consultant literature, the following three sections consider content in school reform, school administration, and corporate consultant literature applicable to the findings of this research.

#### *Consultants and the School Reform Literature*

Turn to the index in the back of school reform literature, and you will probably not find the word *consultant*. In contrast to my study which places pivotal actors (external consultants) at schools' permeable boundaries continually moving in and out, reform literature's preoccupation generally lodges either firmly in-house with permanent school staff or in the greater state and federal educational community beyond schools' borders. Reform literature's stakeholders of interest remain largely separated—academics and policy makers outside and school staff members inside. Consultants, on the other hand, function as emissaries, leaving their client schools for a time, analyzing the greater community's expectations, and then carrying that information back inside schools. We saw earlier that Ann needed to “wrap [her] arms around new legislation;” Yvonne attends seminars at her own expense because she feels “an obligation to stay on top of everything that’s new;” and Sheryl had to study

continuously in order to satisfy “that wanting to make a difference syndrome.” Consultants’ unique zigzag-like pattern is not found in reform literature, nor is it duplicated by any other actors in the education field.

Even though reform literature largely ignores external consultants, it does support my research, since it identifies the kinds of schools students need and difficulties associated with moving schools in new directions (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Littky, 2004). Such literature is comparable to my research because it demonstrates how administrators and teachers and other stakeholders might gather themselves together to strengthen their school and, in so doing, prepare to support their consultants and to sustain improvement initiatives after the consultants move on. This body of literature often conveys the passion for student achievement and compassion for dedicated educators struggling toward school improvement that my consultants manifested during our interviews. Reform literature sometimes holds up studies or examples of successful schools as proof that schools can be turned around, and it frequently provides carefully crafted guidelines telling educators how to proceed. Although this literature necessarily exposes dire conditions in some schools, it also inspires educators to believe in our K-12 system and to continue the good fight for reform. In these ways, without directly referring to consultants, reform literature supplements my findings regarding staff roles in school-consultant partnerships.

One exception to reform literature’s disregard of external consulting is Fullan’s book, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2001). While addressing school improvement, he offers a chapter titled “The Consultant” in

which he notes that a study of Illinois school districts found that the 13 most successful districts all accessed external consultants, while none of the 8 least successful districts did so (p.187). He addresses an issue that was also of concern to the consultants whom I studied saying, "Don't work with districts that are not ready and willing to support the reform at several levels" (p. 189), meaning that classroom, building, and district level personnel all need to be on board. Less than two full pages in this brief chapter, however, are devoted to the external consultant, and the two researchers Fullan cites, Block (2000) and Argyris (2000), are neither educators nor educational consultants. They are corporate management consulting scholars. Nevertheless, through their words Fullan offers advice echoed by my study's consultants. Aim for long-term commitment by staff members and offer good ideas in ways that will motivate others. Fullan's need to turn to corporate consultant literature is highly telling, it seems, of the dearth of research on educational consultants.

While school reform literature would seem to react to the term *external consultant* with "who?" my research found consultants believing they are major actors for long-lasting change because of their ability to analyze and respond to individuals. Unlike school reform literature that often categorizes educators in order to discuss their behaviors, my study found consultants less interested in grouping their clients than in describing individual persons, conversations, and events. For example, consultants told of surreptitiously measuring new clients' individual abilities during initial visits and then leaving to plan return visits when

they would launch processes to transition individual personnel into improvement teams.

One of the earliest insights I gained about the consultants whom I studied offers another contrast with school reform literature. They refused to form expectations about new client schools prior to their first visit. They were emphatic toward staff members and united in their insistence that they would make no prior generalizations about schools or the people who work there. Unlike school reform literature which often paints a panoramic view of organization change, the consultants provided the proverbial “up close and personal” look at real people in specific schools building relationships and infrastructure capable of sustaining school reform. Although they willingly answered my questions about work they did from their offices, in every case, descriptions of their work inside client schools were far more detailed and expansive.

#### *Consultants and the School Administration Literature*

Other educational literature pertinent to this study in its promotion of school improvement focuses on administrators, typically explaining leadership techniques. It speaks about how administrators might guide teachers through improvement initiatives, but rarely about how they should collaborate with external consultants (Boris-Schacter and Langer, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Hightower, Husbands, Lafors, Young, and Christopher, 2005; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Fortunately, literature reporting on studies of administrator capacity does often target skills that consultants in my study found wanting, and it offers suggestions for improved leadership that will inadvertently help administrators

partner with consultants. For example, Boris-Schacter and Langer confirm instructional leadership's potential for improving teaching; Leithwood and Riehl affirm the principal as a primary player in school reform; both Fossey and MacNeil (2004) and Huber (2004) call for educational leadership training focused on practical "how to" skill building; and DuFour (2001) urges principals to establish professional learning communities as vehicles for teacher learning. Chapter 6 explained that consultants whom I studied advocated similar skill building for administrators.

I found no conflict between needs discussed in educational leadership literature and what my study's consultants said about administrator deficiencies, but I also found little mention of procedures superintendents and principals should follow or behaviors they should display toward external consultants. This is in direct contrast with the consultants whom I studied who unanimously named administrators at both district and building levels as factors largely influential upon their ability to effect long-lasting improvement for client schools. While commendable consultants are highly verbal about administrators' critical role in school-consultant partnerships, school administration literature remains nearly silent.

As the consultants whom I studied returned time and again to talking about their relationships with district and building administrators and as I observed them interact with administrators while I shadowed them, one particular insight gradually became clear. Among the consultants, there seemed to be a definite hesitation to tell superintendents and principals that school-consultant



partnerships presented them with opportunities to learn by watching their consultants at work. The consultants reported that they model subtly, but not overtly. There may be two explanations. Since school administration literature neglects to inform leaders about their obligation to learn from external consultants, administrators are perhaps not cognizant of this opportunity to learn how to sustain improvement initiatives after their partnerships with consultants end. As the consultants reported, when administrators fail to keep appointments and drift from consultant-led sessions with cell phones in hand, they, in effect, signal the consultant that they are either not aware or not interested in stepping up to their obligation. Another explanation came from Eve who noted that there are few grants available to pay for consultants to train administrators and that in any case school boards usually expect superintendents and principals to be beyond the need for additional professional development. This forces Eve, who specializes in leadership training, to enter schools under the guise of helping with literacy or math and limits her opportunity to launch partnerships openly encompassing both teacher and administrator training. This study suggests that school administrator literature might invite consultants' input and begin discussing administrators' obligations to school-consultant partnerships. This dissertation should not be a stand-alone document, but should soon be followed by more study and reporting of administrators' as well as consultants' roles in effective partnerships.

*Consultants and the Corporate Consulting Literature*

In order to find meaningful research on consulting, perhaps paradoxically, I had to turn almost exclusively to corporate literature where management consulting is examined in detail (Cockman, Evans, and Reynolds, 1996; Markham, 1998; Neumann, Kellner, and Dawson-Shepherd, 1997). Although corporate literature provides valuable insight into the history of consulting and various consulting styles, it speaks from venues beyond school campuses. As I read this literature, I was struck not so much by what authors said as by what they didn't say. The student as the ultimate object of concern was, of course, missing. Instead of issues my consultants talked about such as student data, federal grant compliance, and administrators as instructional leaders, I read about market share, production expense, and profitability. Nevertheless, corporate consultant literature was applicable to schools in its explanations of systemic change and leader-follower relationships. A component of this literature describes exchanges between consultants and clients that resonate with those reported by my study's consultants: (1) exchange of trust between consultant and client and (2) transference of knowledge from consultant to client. This literature augments my research finding that trust necessarily overarches school staff-consultant relationships, while need for knowledge transfer is the bridge that brings consultants to partnerships with schools.

*Reciprocal trust exchange is ideal.*

Some corporate consulting literature identifies trust as an essential feature of client-consultant partnerships (Bell and Nadler, 1979; Harrison, 1995; Lippitt, 1978; and Markham, 1993). Maister, Green, and Galford (2000) find that gaining

client trust is sometimes a complicated endeavor. A potentially undermining factor can be a consultant's inability to gauge a client's view of her trustworthiness. If a consultant doesn't realize that she isn't appearing trustworthy, she may devote too little effort to reinforcing essential bonds with clients. Maister et al. also point to an additional conundrum. Although a client may feel insecure and anxious about a virtual stranger poking into the depths of his organization, this same stranger has been retained to do exactly that. Even though she makes her client uncomfortable, the consultant who is not able to "reveal nuances, problems, barriers, and issues of which the client is unaware" (p. 28) is of little use to her client. Gaining the trust of a nervous, defensive client can be difficult; yet it is essential since early distrust endangers the partnership, especially when it subsequently becomes magnified during challenges common to change procedures. I have indicated that the consultants whom I studied do understand the delicacy required when working with defensive staff members. For example, they became noticeably empathetic when they explained that some principals become defensive because they suspect everyone is blaming them for their school's failure.

This study also revealed consultants' awareness of the other end of the trust spectrum where the client wants to rely upon his consultant and, in fact, looks upon himself as "a person who has someone to lean on" (Salacuse, 2000, p. 12). Yvonne gave an example of this when she told about the client who said her voice is "soothing" and that when he hears her voice on the telephone, he knows "everything is going to be okay." When a consultant consciously asks a

client to rely upon her and the client knowingly agrees to lean on his consultant, mutual trust has a nurturing environment in which to develop. As my research participants roamed from one aspect of consulting to another over the course of four interviews, they described both scenarios, those where they sought to signal their trustworthiness to clients (initial visits) and others where they needed to trust clients. The latter surfaced when they talked about district level leadership.

The consultants strongly advocated superintendents supporting their work and wished they could depend upon them to faithfully attend consulting sessions, allocate promised funds and time to reform processes, and emotionally support principals through long-term school improvement endeavors. My research participants' testimony regarding superintendents' tendency to contract with consultants and then woefully neglect them led me to conclude that some district leaders do not realize that their trustworthiness is integral to school improvement. Argandona (1995) urges advice-seekers to "personally take [adopt] the appropriate decision" and to "not unload responsibility for the decision or its consequences onto the advisor" (p. 97). Although this wisdom from corporate literature is welcome, additional study by education researchers specifically examining superintendents' and principals' integral role in school-consultant partnerships is needed. Such research should be followed by professional development informing leaders of their potential contribution to school improvement as well as their moral obligation to uphold partnerships with their presence and with district resources.

*Consultants increase clients' knowledge.*

A second aspect of consulting, featured in corporate literature (von Krogh, 2000; Dawson, 2000; Czerniawska, 2002) and transferable to the education arena, concerns value added to clients in the form of knowledge imparted by consultants. This literature rings true to my findings regarding how consultants explain roles they play and methods they use. I discovered their desire to transfer knowledge to everyone from superintendents to teachers. Dawson (2000) assigns knowledge an apt definition for the energized corporate world when he says knowledge is “the capacity to act effectively” (p. 3). He devotes his book to the idea that good consultants add value to clients when they share knowledge, especially when they also teach clients how to acquire and process knowledge. This concept of adding value by imparting knowledge contextualizes Cloud's (2006) notion of consultant integrity where an advisor first joins a larger mission (in our case school improvement partnership) and once installed in the mission, integrates his abilities to recognize reality, handle negativity, and create growth. I learned during interviews that once my interviewees join partnerships and discover clients' reality (recall their nod to culture's importance) they promptly begin to add value to clients by sharing knowledge. Of course, knowledge owned by a corporation (or school) only fulfills its promise when it helps members solve problems and make decisions. This returns us to Dawson's assertion that knowledge is the capacity to act effectively.

This study has revealed that consultants hope their partnerships with schools will leave clients prepared to sustain school-wide improvement far into the future. Czerniawska (2002) describes difficulties that consultants may

confront as they tackle this task. She points out that disseminating knowledge to an entire organization is far different than to one person. First, the knowledge must be distributed in a way that promotes receptivity. We saw that consultants often interact most directly with principals and lead teachers and they depend upon those persons to spread knowledge to other teachers through a ripple-like action. In considering how consultant knowledge may spread throughout client schools, we note once again that school leaders, most notably superintendents and principals, must uphold their side of school-consultant partnerships. From the moment that school improvement via a consultant is first broached, administrators need to prepare all staff members to welcome the outsider and receive new knowledge, in other words to, "act in good faith with a genuine desire to seek advice" (Argandona, 1995, p. 96).

Czerniawska (2002) says further that although knowledge is transferable, someone in the organization must determine where among several departments the knowledge should travel. Consultants whom I studied exposed this as an example of their dependence upon school leaders' wisdom and willingness to hear their advice. I propose that very early in their partnerships leaders and consultants should identify targets among staff members where consultants' knowledge will be shared. Leaders and consultants should also recognize that all who are targeted for new knowledge will blend new information with understandings they gained earlier in disparate times and settings. Just as Sheryl quickly set annoyance aside and empathized with a resistant teacher because she knew he came from a dysfunctional district, other consultants must prepare

for unpredictable consequences that might occur when they layer new information upon pre-existing beliefs. Finally, Czerniawska says that knowledge is perishable. This is a concept readily transferable to the world of schooling and to this study, centered as it was in a venue where children change rapidly and achievement data age quickly. Insight I have gained through this study leads me to appreciate consultants' mentoring of staff members through student assessment and re-evaluation processes, thereby performing a vital service to their clients and to client school students.

This brief look at knowledge sharing, although explained largely in corporate rather than school consulting literature, corroborates the sense of vastness and complexity in school-consultant partnerships which my study considered. It is important that school leaders and consultants heed the implication that neither one should attempt to single-handedly dominate the knowledge-sharing aspect of their relationship. Neither should either party pass to the other entire responsibility for disseminating new knowledge. As Eve said, the best scenario is when superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders join with her to plan the improvement program. She reminds leaders further that attending original planning sessions is not adequate. Continual meetings for idea exchange and commitment renewal allow knowledge to flow unimpeded from the consultant to the staff, and continuous leadership presence at training sessions, visible to all attendees, nurtures receptivity for that knowledge.

There is undoubtedly a need for additional study and literature focused specifically on processes inherent in school-consultant partnerships. I argue that

greater understanding of skills essential to quality external consulting is needed. Equally urgent is further research examining how administrators and teachers can uphold their obligations to consulting partners. I hope that this report will spark interest and that others will conduct similar research and report their findings. To provide balance to the conversation, additional studies might invite administrators and teachers to discuss school improvement from their side of partnerships with consultants. As educators and consultants hear from both parties, they will discover new prerequisites for successful school reform partnerships.

### Implications for Consultants and Educators

Implications for both consultants and practicing educators result from this study. This became apparent especially as I reflected upon weeks spent interviewing and shadowing my research subjects. It was a privilege to study five commendable consultants. They were bright stars among educational consultants, each recommended for this study by educators holding supervisory positions in universities or state departments of education who recognized their expertise and efficacy. The consultants knew that an invitation to join this study tendered a tip of the hat from ranking educators, but despite their laudatory entry into this research project they neither sang their own praises nor implied that uncommon skill carried them through one successful school partnership after another. Through their willingness to talk with me at length and to be observed



while working, the consultants contributed to understandings of potential interest to all who pursue school improvement.

### *Implications for Current and Future Consultants*

I found commendable consultants balancing voluntary submersion in client schools' situations with independence inherent in their freedom to enter and leave at will. All of the participants in my study were retired from teaching or administrator careers and could have chosen to fill post-career years with leisure pursuits. Through my research, I came to realize that they work in schools because school is where they want to be, and I assert that they regularly draw upon personal reservoirs of integrated abilities which they channel into service for client schools. This assertion suggests two implications useful to those presently consulting or wondering if they are suited to this education niche.

#### *Measure experience and knowledge.*

The consultants whom I studied view themselves as self-sufficient experts blessed with experience and knowledge. Decisions about which experience to draw from and what skills to apply to different school partnerships are theirs to make. Such independence may be exhilarating, but it also demands disciplined responsibility. The implication is that people considering becoming consultants should know themselves to be persons who find independence stimulating but not frightening. As the consultants whom I studied referenced their pre-consulting experience, they described experiential depth gained through various educational positions ranging from teaching, to principalships, to central office district level positions. They frequently said they knew how to guide teachers and

administrators because they had fulfilled similar roles during their earlier careers, and that they could empathize with clients because they had walked in their shoes. They valued their past because of what it allowed them to do in the present, that is, judiciously retrieve from their rich past to serve present clients. I propose that educators who plan to transition from their present positions into consulting should mine the depths of their experience and knowledge for resources helpful to clients and make sure they possess deep understandings adequate to the task. Through insight gained from this study, I have come to believe that this responsibility rests heavily upon each consultant.

*Teach educators to know their inner selves.*

A second implication of my research, closely linked to the first, addresses people's need to know themselves. A first glance, this study's data might seem to suggest that for everyone involved in school improvement, including consultants and all levels of school staff, the primary need is for knowledge about how students learn, perhaps how other schools have successfully improved—in other words, the nuts and bolts of school improvement. My finding does not negate that idea, of course, but it does point to a correlative need. If administrators, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers are to navigate their way through change procedures with optimum benefits to students, they must first understand themselves. Much adjustment might be required of staff members during their school's period of change as schedules, job descriptions, performance expectations, and more are revised. Wise consultants first help administrators prepare for emotional upheaval ranging from doubt to elation to exhaustion.

Administrators who successfully analyze their own inner disequilibrium and work through it can better prepare their followers to do the same. When staff members can blame their fluctuating emotions on change per se, they don't have to blame them on specific features of their school's improvement initiative. Therefore, consultants who present change as a phenomenon likely to affect emotions will more likely safeguard schools' initiatives from misguided attacks. Upon hearing my study's consultants explain how resistance hinders improvement initiatives, I find that it behooves consultants to teach self-awareness and coping strategies to school leaders and then mentor those leaders as they, in turn, coach teachers through the process.

#### *Implications for Administrators and Teachers*

Three implications for teachers and administrators partnering with consultants result from this study. Perhaps the most notable, due to the emphasis it engendered during interviews, centers around consultants' acknowledged lack of power.

##### *Wield decision-making power thoughtfully.*

The consultants emphatically said they can only advise. They possess power of suggestion rather than enforcement, since at the end of the day only school personnel make binding decisions. Implications of this finding rest heavily upon the shoulders of teachers and administrators. After all, if consultants are not the partners with ultimate power to bring school reform to fruition, who are the power owners? Clearly, the answer is teachers and administrators. Without fail, every time a partnering relationship is established, staff personnel must decide

something about their external consultant and her suggestions. No one escapes the reality that something must be decided. Some decisions are private while others are highly visible. Whether a participant's decision is to resist or engage, each decision resides someplace along a continuum progressing from innermost thoughts shared with no one, to closed-door classrooms and offices where visibility is limited, to school-wide staff meetings, to full community disclosure. Once a school enters into partnership with a consultant, this decision continuum stirs into life and decisions are soon manifested in behavior. Consultants whom I interviewed were clear—there really is no escape from decision making of some sort. Because decisions are actions' precursors, the unavoidable conclusion is that a school-consultant partnership demands responsible use of decision-making power by school staff. I assert that it behooves all levels of school personnel, leaders and followers, to acknowledge their decision-making power, find the impetus behind decisions they are making, and continually weigh their decisions' impact upon their school's hope for improvement.

*Participate physically and visibly.*

A second implication of my finding, closely related to responsible power usage, regards administrators' physical participation. Consultants believe that when administrators retain their services and then make nominal visits or no visits to consultant-led planning and professional development sessions, teachers may assume that the consultant's work is relegated to low-level status. To a teacher, low-level importance equates with impermanence plagued with insufficient time, funding, or energy support. Enthusiasm for working hard on

initiatives that may soon fade away diminishes. I assert that administrators who view school-consultant partnerships as largely the responsibility of the external consultant are mistaken. Although consultants can fuel the engine, momentum must be initiated and maintained by school personnel with school leaders noticeably in the driver's seat. Therefore, as quickly as schools make a decision to retain a consultant's services, their administrators should make a correlating decision to be visibly present and fully participative in all or most consultant-led training sessions.

*Adopt a willing-to-learn attitude.*

Beyond lending credibility to improvement initiatives, superintendents' and principals' presence when the consultant is working affords them opportunity to increase their organizational management and instructional skills, a benefit suggested by a third implication of my finding. I discovered through consultants' reports that some administrators are not capable of being strong partners with them, because they are not well prepared to handle personnel relationships or practical change procedures such as establishing collaborative team norms, leading staff planning sessions, or re-allocating resources. In addition, prior teaching experience does not guarantee the ability to accurately evaluate classroom learning environments and provide instructional leadership. Because such knowledge is so critical to administrators attempting to lead improvement initiatives, their physical presence and willingness to learn while consultants train teachers are essential.

My study suggests further that when administrators are in the room they not only learn along with teachers, but they also have opportunity to watch the consultant model leadership techniques. During follow-up debriefing sessions, consultants and administrators can discuss leadership and, thus, prepare the administrator to maintain or even advance the improvement initiative in the consultant's absence. More than pointing to specific skills needed, my finding highlights the need for school leaders to adopt an overarching willing-to-learn-from-consultants attitude. As a school's improvement project unfolds, new knowledge gaps among staff members may surface, but if the superintendent and principal become visible learners, they will inspire teachers to learn also. The consultant will then have engaged partners with greater capacity for driving dynamic change procedures.

Through my study, I have come to understand that successful school-consultant partnerships do not rely upon knowledge about any one school improvement model or particular consultant methods. Instead they rely upon willing attitudes, broad knowledge about human emotions and relationships, and a certain humbleness of spirit that infuses everyone from the superintendent to the teachers with a willingness to learn as well as teach, in other words to lead sometimes and follow at other times

### Limitations Inherent In My Study

Long before I began this study, I anticipated the day when my findings would be useful, especially to practicing educators and consultants. I assumed

that in order to be useful, my findings needed to be generalizable from my small subject population of five commendable consultants to a larger consultant population. Winter (2000), however, suggests that “the extent to which the results can be generalized and thus applied to other populations” should not be overrated and that “qualitative findings are best generalisable to the development of theories and not wider populations” (p. 8). Winter also raises the point that undue focus on generalizability might require the researcher to limit his study to “measuring those elements that, by definition and distortion are common to all.” (p. 6). Winter continues,

This raises the question of ‘at what cost’ are we exchanging accuracy for generalizability....One could argue that generalization in itself is neither “valid” nor accurate. It is likely that a “generalisable” statement, whilst relating to all those to whom it is applied, may not actually describe the phenomena of any single case with any accuracy, in the same way that a mean average score need not be the same value as any of the numbers of which it is an average. (p. 6)

Johnson (1997) also suggests that “generalizability is not the major purpose of qualitative research” (p. 5). He proposes, in fact, that it is best if the qualitative researcher not aim for generalizability because research subjects are usually not randomly selected and much qualitative research seeks the unique rather than what is widely applicable in their subject population. This particular caveat regarding generalizability resonates with my research purpose.

As I stated earlier, I entered this research project wanting to understand what highly respected consultants know and do to effect long-lasting school improvement. My goal has been to generate research that would yield findings with capacity to inform school reform consultants and educators pursuing improvement for their own schools. I present my research as a deep look at five consultants, and the ensuing findings have been offered as pools of information from which others may draw at will. If, for example, upon reading this dissertation, a superintendent suggests to his external consultant, "Let's talk about our partnership," then my research will have achieved purpose by encouraging further investigation. Aguinaldo (2004) says that he has approached his research with a similar view on end use of data which he labels a "pragmatic approach" (p. 128). He does, however, add a note of caution, saying that a researcher must not fixate on the end use of her data. As an example, he says that while researching a health-related issue, pre-determining what constitutes health might cause a researcher to unintentionally direct his research toward anticipated findings.

Qualitative research literature studies this matter of intentional use of findings from several different angles. Johnson (1997) urges qualitative researchers to educate readers adequately to permit them to determine accurately whether findings generalize to them. His recommended tool is a thorough methodology chapter informing readers about the subject population, data collection techniques used, and so forth. Winter (2000) warns qualitative researchers to guard against forcing explanations about findings to fit "your own



pre-existing, conceptual moulds" (p. 9). Yet she acknowledges unavoidable difficulties since findings "inevitably carry with them the political and philosophical views of the researcher and the methodology employed" (p. 9). Shank and Villella (2004) grant a more liberating approach, saying that qualitative researchers have "the informed freedom to sort through their data, looking for those particularly important and surprising "nuggets" that help them to explain phenomena in whole new ways" (p. 53).

In light of Winter's (2000) and Johnson's (1997) relegation of generalizability to less than prime importance because of qualitative research's search for uniqueness, what becomes of the issue of validity? Describing a view contrasting Winter and Johnson, Golafshani (2003) notes that some researchers believe validity is found within generalizability. He explains that assumptions of generalizability encourage additional research among the greater population beyond the original subject population. The resulting testing increases the "validity or trustworthiness of the research" (p. 603). Winter (2000), on the other hand, argues that "the fact that there are so many possible definitions and replacement terms for 'validity' suggests that it is a concept entirely relative to the person and belief system from which it stems (p.1), once again removing generalizability from a place of importance. After examining definitions of validity by "a selection of different authors writing from different methodological positions" (p. 2), Winter determines that "it is possible to suggest that the aggregated definition of 'validity' could be that of accuracy" (p. 3). Although not suggesting that validity is entirely encompassed within accuracy, Golafshani (2003) agrees

that accuracy is the determining factor and that there are ways to enhance validity through accuracy, "Engaging multiple methods, such as, observation, interviews and recordings will lead to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities" (p. 604).

Aguinaldo (2004) suggests that rather than questioning whether a particular research is valid, a better question might be, "What is this research valid for" (p. 130)? Validity in this sense is approached through considering what function the research can serve. Given his position that validity can be signaled by end use rather than as the result of method, Aguinaldo refuses to elevate one qualitative research method over another. He cautions, however, that although, "qualitative researchers should not be constrained within a 'methodological straightjacket' and must be allowed to utilize whatever methods necessary to explore the social phenomenon under consideration," those choices "need to be made explicit and held up to scrutiny" (p. 133). Aguinaldo believes that as researchers lift their methods up for study by others, "the process of validation is arguably 'democratized' by the proliferation of readings emerging from researchers, participants, and readers" (p. 134), and he suggests that through this process of scrutiny, validity is established when examiners determine for whom the findings are useful.

I am cognizant of the small size of the sample population from whom I drew data. Five is a very small number among educational consultants. Nevertheless, I am confident of this study's findings for two reasons. First, the consultants whom I studied did not work in isolation. Long before they began

consulting, as educator practitioners they worked with consultants on the teacher/administrator side of partnerships. Now as practicing consultants they regularly recruit consultant peers to help with particular client needs. Thus, their experience with consultant and school personnel collaboration is broader than their own consulting experience. Their memories span many years and encompass multiple school-consultant situations. Therefore, I believe my data reflect consulting realities well beyond the confines of my subjects' present consulting practice.

My second source of confidence in my findings stems from my original research question which asked what commendable consultants know and do to facilitate school improvement. I never wanted to generate an exhaustive "how to" list of consulting techniques. Instead I wanted to give voice to skilled, experienced consultants. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that no one approach is necessarily most appropriate for a given research project and that researchers should select one most congruent with their inquiry. Furthermore, Myers (2000) suggests that when the researcher desires to examine a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (as I did), a small sample size may be appropriate.

According to a report by Non-Profit Research and Evaluation Services (n.d.), regardless of the particular method, qualitative research evokes personal interactions between the researcher and subject. Contact is direct and questions are open-ended allowing the subject to answer from his or her experience and belief system. This research invited consultants to delve deeply into their side of school-consultant partnerships. The quick willingness with which each one

agreed to participate in my study indicated to me that they welcomed this opportunity to reveal realities of their highly specialized niche in education. Throughout my research notes, I hear five commendable consultants' declaring, "For us, this is how it is."

The depth of my interrogation of five commendable consultants yielded findings that are credible in their accurate representation of the consultants and valid in their investigation of school-consultant partnerships. However, although I consistently alluded to the presence of multiple parties to the partnerships, this report conveys only consultants' perspectives. Thus, this research is admittedly only a beginning and signals a need for additional study encompassing not only external school consultants, but also administrators and teachers who voluntarily and involuntarily partner with consultants. Finally, employment of other research methodologies such as case studies, along with investigation of supportive roles played by state departments of education as well as private organizations will bring further clarity to our understanding of school-consultant partnerships.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **TOOLS AND TERMS**

#### **Adequate Yearly Progress**

*No Child Left Behind* requires each state to define adequate yearly progress for school districts and schools, within the parameters set by Title I. Each state began by setting a "starting point" that was based on the performance of its lowest-achieving demographic group or of the lowest-achieving schools in the state, whichever was higher. The state then set the bar—or level of student achievement—that a school must attain after two years in order to continue to show adequate yearly progress.

Districts where schools do not achieve adequate yearly progress after two continuous years and are, therefore, identified for improvement are required to provide technical support. It is at this point that consultants are sent to support improvement initiatives. (United States Department of Education, n.d. c)

#### **Center for Creative Leadership**

The Center for Creative Leadership is a nonprofit educational institution that conducts leader training and offers materials in support of leadership development. Additional information is available at [ccl.org](http://ccl.org)

#### **NVIVO**

NVIVO is a research software tool that may be used to manage, shape and analyze information. Additional information is available at [nvivo.com](http://nvivo.com). Also see references below: Ozkan (2004) and Walsh (2003).

#### **University Associates**

University Associates (UA) specializes in "assisting organizations with management and leadership development, innovation, organizational development and change, trainer and facilitator skill development, consultant (internal and external) skill development, strategic and operational planning, and human resource development." Additional information is available at [universityassociates.com](http://universityassociates.com).

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Interview One**

##### Framing Question

What are commendable consultants' beliefs about schooling and themselves as agents of school change?

- Teacher function
- Administrator function
- Teacher and administrator interaction
- School environment
- Personal attributes consultants draw upon when consulting

#### **Interview Two**

##### Framing Question

What are commendable consultants' beliefs about factors that impact their ability to effect lasting school change?

- Factors that help
- Factors that hinder
- How school staff enact these factors
- How such enactment impacts consultant efficacy

#### **Interview Three**

##### Framing Question

What are commendable consultants' beliefs about roles they play as agents of school change?

- Roles consultants play due to philosophical decisions they have made
- How school factors affect consultants' role choices
- Roles consultants are contractually called upon to play
- Long-distance roles consultants play on behalf of clients while not actually at the school site

#### **Interview Four**

##### Framing Question

What practices do commendable consultants adopt to effect lasting school change?

- Specific practices consultants use when situated in various consulting settings and conditions
- How practice choices relate to beliefs, factors, and roles identified by the consultant during previous interviews
- Whether consultants attempt to maintain practice consistency or routinely adjust practice as consulting settings and conditions change

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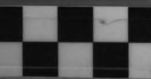
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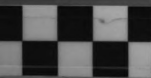




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