Chapter 11

Getting the Data

WHEN YOU FINALLY have a contract and you have entered the discovery phase, you are ready to collect some information and develop your own assessment of what is happening to create problems for the client. The business of this phase is:

1. Collecting information at three different layers of analysis, to understand both the presenting problem and the underlying problems
2. Assessing the organizational and managerial climate in which your recommendations will be received
3. Dealing with resistance of the client in sharing information with you
4. Viewing the interviews you do as an active force in beginning to solve the problem: The act of interviewing itself changes an organization
5. Reducing the data to a manageable number of issues
6. Collecting and analyzing data accurately and objectively

The Steps in Getting Data

No matter what kind of information you seek—whether you look at information flow, equipment design, people's attitudes—or what dimensions you analyze, there are some general ways to describe the steps involved in data collection that might be helpful. Each time you collect data, whether it is a six-month or six-minute project, you make these choices.

1. *Identifying the Presenting Problem* Any discovery begins with a conversation about a concern that line managers have about their organization. The manager's first description of the problem is called the **presenting problem**. The presenting problem is usually only a symptom of the real problem, and the purpose of the data collection is to elaborate and broaden the manager's initial statement. Identifying the presenting problem is the first step in the data collection.

2. *Deciding to Proceed* The consultant and the client together make a decision to do the data collection. Often this involves several people who work for the manager who can confirm that there is an incentive to do a study. The motivation to proceed should be based on the desire to make improvements in the organization, not just on the desire to do research.
3. *Selecting Dimensions* A limited number of questions needs to be selected. These questions will be within the technical realm or discipline of the consultant. A financial person will select questions about financial information and control; a personnel person will ask questions about compensation, attitudes, and climate. The dimensions should be limited—under twenty. Too much data from the discovery will be overwhelming.
4. *Deciding Who Will Be Involved* Decide what levels of the organization will be included in the discovery. How many from each level? Remember that asking people questions creates expectations that they will get feedback on the results.
5. *Selecting the Data Collection Method* The method depends on the scope of your inquiry. Select a method that fits with the time available, the motivation of management, and the severity of the problems. Don't overinvest.

There are only a few ways to collect data.

6. *Collecting Data* Do it. Distribute questionnaires, do interviews, sit in on meetings, study reports, bring people together. Collect information until it starts to get repetitive. You will recognize this when you start getting bored.

After data collection, you go through the remaining steps in the process.

7. *Funneling the Data* Somehow the information needs to be reduced to manageable proportions. The purpose of your analysis is to focus energy, not describe the universe.

8. *Summarizing Data* You need to find a format that will summarize the data for those not familiar with it. Concentrate on the visual impact of your format and how easy it is to understand.
9. *Analyzing Data* What does the information mean? What is important? And why?
10. *Giving Feedback* Report the data analysis to the organization. Who should be at the original feedback meeting? How are those who were involved in the study going to find out the results? Be sure you have allowed enough time in the feedback meeting to really deal with the resistance you will get. Structure the meeting so the majority of time is for discussion, not presentation.
11. *Giving Recommendations* Sometimes this will come before the feedback meeting. They should be within the control of the group who requested the study.
12. *Making a Decision* The process is not complete until a decision has been made to do something.
13. *Implementation* The payoff. Stay around for this phase, even if it's on your own time. After discovery, you may have the best feel for the problems. Your information can be useful in interpreting the hills and valleys of implementation. You also offer ways of involving people in the implementation that will increase the chances that the decision will be translated into effective change.

The first six steps above are the sequence any of us go through in consulting, regardless of our technical disciplines or particular fields of expertise. You know what technical data you want, ways to get it, and what to do with it when you have it … so the rest of this chapter concentrates on data collection in dimensions you may not be used to, paying special attention to your face-to-face encounters with the client as you collect your data.

A Word About Bias

Having an impact as a consultant is to a large extent independent of your methodology or field of expertise. Any number of consultants will come up with different dimensions, different analyses, and different suggestions on the same problem. But the pursuit of *any* dimension will lead to core issues around the management of the organization. It is important, then, to pick dimensions that you are comfortable with and go with them in your discovery, rather than worry about whether you've selected the right or wrong one.

In selecting the dimensions of your discovery, you predefine the problem somewhat, but there is no reason to feel anxiety about biasing the data. If you decide you are going to look at how conflict is handled, or how much people level with each other, or how they plan, you may already have some idea of what is wrong with the organization, particularly if you are an internal consultant. Do not treat this as bias, treat it as insight—your predefinition of the problem is valuable and gives you good clues on how to spend your data collection time. Trust this. You do need to keep listening as you're collecting data to see whether there are other issues that you don't know about. If there are, you need to pursue them. The point is to not treat the insight of your own feeling about being part of the organization as bias, but treat it as useful guidelines.

Assessing How the Problem Is Being Managed

If you want to develop your skills in collecting information directly about how the problem is being managed, there are more than a dozen aspects of organizational life that you can explore. Your goal is to understand something about how this organization functions so that you will understand how they will manage the implementation of your recommendations. Getting data on these dimensions will give you a good picture of the organization. These are also areas that people being interviewed love to talk about, so you will have fun with it.

Ask questions about these areas.

1. *Objectives* What are the goals of the group and the person you are talking to? You want to see how much goal clarity and goal agreement there is.
2. *Subgroups* What is the relationship between groups that have to work together on this problem? Which groups are supportive? Which groups are in conflict? Are there groups or individuals who tend to be excluded from the action? Why?
3. *Support* How does support get expressed in this group? In many groups, support is expressed by silence. "If I like what you are doing, I will leave you alone." Who gets support and from whom?
4. *Evaluation* Do people know where they stand? How do they find out? What are the norms about asking where you stand … and getting an answer?
5. *Sex Roles* What roles do men and women in the organization play? What form does any discrimination take and what impact does it have on this problem?
6. *Status Differences* Which are the high-status and low-status groups? How are the differences expressed and what impact does this have on the problem and people's attitudes toward a particular solution?
7. *Authority and Power* Who has high and low power in this situation? How do people working the problem deal with the power differences? Openly, cautiously? What are people's attitudes about authority—do they openly resist it, overly give in to it, put up with it, or just don't care?
8. *Decision Making* How does the group make decisions? What role does the boss play? How do people get their viewpoints considered in a decision?
9. *Norms for Individual Behavior* What are the norms on taking the initiative, making demands, expressing disagreement, aggressiveness, asking for help, use of questions to make statements, dealing with boredom, risk taking in expressing doubts or uncertainty, openly confronting differences?
10. *Management Information* How are resources identified, progress monitored, movement evaluated, problems identified?
11. *Leadership Style* What are the styles of formal and informal leaders? What is their impact on this problem?
12. *Conflict* How is it managed, confronted, smoothed over, compromised, forced, ignored, suppressed?

13. *Domination* Is the situation dominated by one or more persons? What is their impact? Are they part of the group trying to work the problem, or are they so high up in the organization that they are unreachable?
14. *Attitudes About This Project and Your Involvement* To understand people's attitudes about the problem and what they think of your being involved in trying to solve the problem, try some of these questions.

Of course, you wouldn't use all of these questions. For any one situation, you can scan the dimensions and the ones that are relevant will stand out to you. Asking any two or three of the questions will give you data on a lot of the rest. You can also assume that how the organization manages its current situation will be identical to how you and your suggestions will be managed. If you use these kinds of questions, you will know what you are getting into, and some of the answers should be part of the clear picture that you are going to report on at the feedback meeting.

Use this kind of data as part of your analysis—even if the client didn't ask for it. It is one of the unique contributions you can make to the client. If you want to be of unique value to your client, then you have to take the risk of offering unique information. Accurate information about how the organization is functioning is not available to most managers. The people they work with have such a vested interest in the organization that no one is trusted to be objective. You have less of a vested interest and are in the best position to deal with sensitive issues.

The Data Collection Interview

The interview is a method of data collection that is common to all disciplines and is often tricky to handle. Though there is much written about interviewing methods, it receives special attention here because of its interpersonal nature and the effect it has on the client organization.

The Interview As a Joint Learning Event

By the time you are starting to do something with your data, you have already had a large impact on the line organization. The mere act of asking questions can stimulate people to rethink what they are doing. Your questions express to them without ambiguity what you think is important to focus on in solving the problem you are working on. Clients can learn a lot from your choice of what to investigate.

If you encounter resistance in an interview, deal with the resistance the same way you deal with resistance at any other stage of the process. Pick up the cue, name the resistance, and wait for the person to respond. If you are in an interview and it is giving you nothing, deal with it as authentically as you can. Tell the person that you are not getting what you need. If that doesn't help, at some point terminate the discussion. You will build more trust with that person if you stop the interview than if you go ahead mechanically through your questions, while both of you know that nothing productive is taking place.

Levels of Analysis

Every problem facing persons or organizations has layers, like an onion. Each statement of a problem or situation is an approximation. As you go to deeper layers, you get closer to causes and to actionable statements of the problem.

The initial statement of a problem, the presenting problem, is almost always made in a way that inspires futility—futility on the part of the client and the consultant. If the presenting problem did not inspire futility, it would already have been solved and you would not be talking about it. To accept the presenting problem at face value is to get stuck. Your task is to work with the line manager—or group or organization—to shed light on the layers underneath the presenting problem. By position alone, you are situated advantageously to see the complexity of the layers underneath.

In working with individuals, the layers generally stack up in a pattern like this.

Top Layer The presenting problem comes most often in the form of a concern expressed in organizational or business terms. “We aren't getting our product.” “My group isn't going well.” “The system isn't working.”

Second Layer The person's perceptions about how others are contributing to the problem is the next level. “People are more interested in the stock market than in work.” “Two members of the group do all the talking.” “The people don't understand the system.”

Third Layer This is a statement of how a person sees his or her own way of contributing to the problem. The person may be contributing by certain conscious actions or by simply not giving the problem attention.

This statement is vital because it brings the responsibility closer to the line manager. Instead of expressing the situation in terms of forces outside the person that are creating the problems, the focus is moved a little more internally.

The questions you ask to get information on each layer are very straightforward.

Top Layer What is the technical or business problem that you are experiencing?

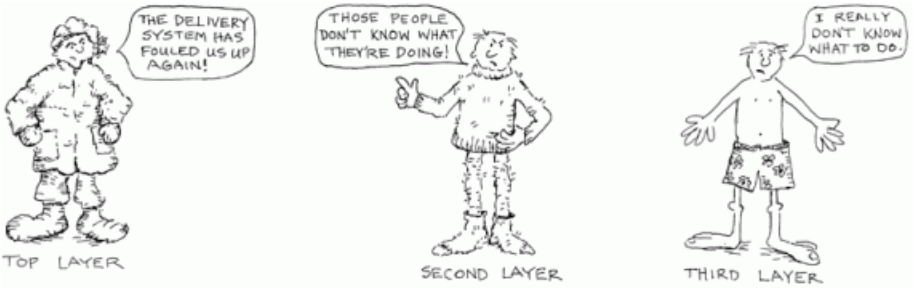
Second Layer What are other individuals or groups in the organization doing to either cause or maintain this problem at its current level of severity?

Third Layer What is your role in the problem? What is there in your approach or way of managing the situation that might be contributing to the problem or getting in the way of its resolution?

Note on the third layer: The person you are talking to might answer, “I don't know of anything I am doing that is a problem. That is your job to find out.” If you get this response, be a little skeptical. People usually have some idea of how they are contributing to a problem, they are just reluctant to mention it. When someone says to you that they don't know what their role in the problem is, there is a rather clever question you can ask: “Suppose you did know what your role was, what would it be?” Sometimes this jogs them enough to answer your third layer question.

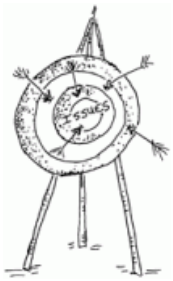
If people really do not see themselves as part of the problem, this, in itself, is important. Why do they not see themselves as players? Their stance of spectator, or more harshly, as victims, may be part of a pattern that speaks to the way the group is managed. Include this in your understanding of how the problem is being managed. This sense of helplessness, or being an outsider, will make a difference in the energy available to act on what you recommend.

These layers can form the basis for questions used in the data collection process. The objective of the discovery (especially with an individual) is to discover a statement of the problem that is enlightening and "actionable"—something someone can do something about. The objective is generally not to advance knowledge or generate wisdom about organizations—that is called research. Rather, the consultant's energy is directed toward continually uncovering issues for which people can take responsibility. The root issue is almost always the responsibility a person feels for the problem—how much are people in the stance of a victim versus in a position with some power to act. Uncovering deeper layers of a problem is really the search for unused resources the line manager has to solve the problem.



Try This Exercise

Experiment with the layers-of-analysis approach by interviewing another person. See whether you can identify layers of a problem that were not clear initially.



As you do this, remember:

> The resource the consultant has to offer is to clarify issues—layers of the problem—not to offer solutions. If statements of solutions were going to be helpful at this stage, the line manager probably would have already thought of them. Even if the solutions are indeed novel, the chance of their acceptance now is slim.

Try to keep moving closer to the center of the issues, not farther away. If you listen carefully, you'll notice side trips (usually about people who aren't in the room). Allow the side trips, but don't take the journeys yourself.

Some Responses to Use in the Interview

You have several options in responding to a person in a discovery interview. Try these responses.

1. *Restatement* Put what is said into other words that communicate and check understanding.
2. *Statement of Your Experience* Give support through identifying with the dilemma. Keep it short.
3. *Open-Ended Question* Ask a question in a way that does not program a certain answer or allow a yes or no answer.
4. *Hypothesis About the Next Layer* Make tentative guesses about how the person is feeling about others involved in the drama, or how the person feels about his or her own role. "You must feel frustrated." "You must feel angry with them." "You must have wondered why they didn't tell you directly."

A Final Comment on What to Look For

Small groups are the vehicle for integrating activity in organizations. Two people can be a small group—or maybe forty. Small group discovery is one step more complex than individual discovery, for it encompasses the interaction among people. It is understanding this interaction that is the core task of small group discovery. Even if the task of the small group is very technical—for example, planning a new product introduction, the interaction of people and viewpoints has to be part of the data collection.

There are two ways of understanding small groups. One is to ask them (either through interviews or questionnaires) what is happening. The second is to observe, firsthand, what is happening.

Norms in Groups—Avoiding the Leadership Love Trap

The complexity of small group functioning can be understood most easily through the concept of group norms. [1] Group norms are statements of common and acceptable ways of behaving in the group. Acceptable ways of dealing with the issues all groups have to deal with—power, conflict, support, risk taking, leveling, problem definition, problem exploration, solution finding, decision making. Each group, whether consciously or not, develops certain ways of dealing with these issues from the instant of its inception. Norms can be identified via interview, questionnaire, or observation. They are nonjudgmental statements of behavior. "Support in this group is expressed by silence." "Until Alice agrees, the group does not move on." "The group starts its meeting with a discussion of solutions, almost before the problem is defined."

The reason for focusing on group norms is to try and balance the overwhelming emphasis organizations and consultants alike give to "leadership style." There is a great tendency to give the leader total credit or blame for how well a group is performing. People think that the solution to most organizational problems is to get a new leader. It's a sports mentality. Fire the manager.

It takes two to tango, and if a group is having trouble solving a problem, the members of that group have a part in the problem and should be a part of the solution. Pinning too much responsibility on the leader can be a defense for the rest of the group and for the consultant. The group says, "If it weren't for that manager, we could get the job done." Well, the group always has a part in the melodrama. They must be colluding in some ways to keep the situation from improving. They might be a part of the problem by remaining silent, or their sin may be one of resisting everything the manager suggests. If group members can support one another and confront the difficulty they are having with the manager, the situation usually improves. When a manager is blamed and changed, it just means that everyone has to wait around for six months or more until the new person "gets up to speed and gets a feel for the situation."

Resist putting the problems at the door of the manager only. View the group as a self-maintaining system, sharing the blame and the credit. I believe it is important to view all problems as organizational problems. And what you're really trying to do is change the norms and methods the organization uses to do business.

Your Experience As Data

A last comment on data collection. The client manages you, the consultant, the same way the client manages other resources and people. If you want to understand the client's management style, you simply have to observe how you are treated. Are you feeling controlled, listened to, supported, treated with respect or disdain? Are decisions with the client collaborative or one-way? Is the client open to options or forever on one track? Your observations and experience about the client are valid data. Paying close attention to how you are managed by the client early in the project gives you more guidance on what to explore in determining how the technical/business problem is being managed.

Checklist #5. Planning a Data Collection Meeting

To prepare for a data collection meeting, here are some guidelines to consider. They both cover the business of the data collection and also help you prepare for any resistance you might get.

1. Asking questions is an active occasion for learning. Use the meeting as an opportunity to deal with resistance and generate interest and commitment.
2. The response you get provides valuable data on the ultimate implementation of your expertise.

   Notice how the client manages the discussion with you:

   - How much interest and energy is there on this project?
   - On which points is the client uneasy or defensive?
   - On which points is the client open to learning and change?
   - Where is the client unrealistic in estimating the ease or difficulty of some action?
3. What is your understanding of the presenting problem?

   Now, based on your experience, what do you think your layers of analysis will yield?

   - Layer 1—What technical/business problems is the client likely experiencing?
   - Layer 2—What are others in the client's organization likely contributing to the problem? Who are the other likely actors in the problem?
   - Layer 3—What is the client doing that is helping create the problem or preventing it (unknowingly) from being solved?
4. What organizational folklore, history, and culture surrounds this project? Who are the ogres and angels in the client's setting? Acceptance of the folklore as truth is part of what blocks resolution. Identify areas of potential blind spots.
5. You can support and confront during the meeting.

   - What support can you give the client at this point? (For example: tentative recommendations, personal encouragement and assurance, acknowledging difficulties, other similar situations you have known, appreciation for being candid with you?)
   - How might you confront the client in this meeting? (For example: about not getting good data, client over-answering questions and controlling discussion too much, client omitting key areas to discuss, answering questions with one word answers, constant interruptions in the meetings, client skipping around

too much, client doesn't believe in project, playing down seriousness or implications of the problem, negative attitudes about consultants in general?)

6. What nonverbal data can you look for? What in the setting of the meeting carries a message on client commitment and involvement in your project?
7. What data do you want to collect about how the organization is functioning?

Checklist #6. Reviewing the Data Collection Meeting

Your notes contain the content of the data collection meeting. Here are some questions to answer afterward about the process of the meeting. It also is a review of the data collection concepts.

1. How did the client manage the discussion?

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Client Control 100 percent                    Consultant Control 100 percent
|_____________________________________________________________________________|
No client energy for the project                      Very high client energy
|_____________________________________________________________________________|
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2. What is the technical problem?
3. What others are contributing to the problem?
4. What is the client doing to create the problem or to prevent its resolution?
5. What folklore, history, ogres, and angels can you identify on this project? Any blind spots client is missing?
6. What support statements did you make?
7. What confronting statements did you make?
8. What nonverbal data did you notice?

[1] There are a lot of books and articles on group and organizational norms. One of the best is by Neale Clapp, listed in the bibliography.