STEP BY STEP CONFIDENTIAL PEER CONSULTATION

By Gene L. Morton

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Would you like to hear how experts in your field have worked their way through tricky problems in their internal and external consultancies?

Would you like to have someone you can call to work through complex career challenges?

The members of Associated Consultants International (ACI) provide personal peer consultations on career, ethical and practice development issues. In these conversations, they share their experience and knowledge of novel interventions and about the details of memorable consulting projects. The client in this setting, meaning the person who calls for the peer consultation, is able to cherry-pick from their many ideas, and select what will best resolve her or his most difficult practice issues. Clients use these short sessions to solve problems or make progress toward goals in important aspects of their career, work or relationships.

What Is A Confidential Peer Consultation?

Peer consultation is a structured process used to seek the counsel of knowledgeable and experienced colleagues. There is a client, a panel of colleagues and a facilitator.

The colleagues selected to sit on a client's consultation are chosen for their relevant knowledge, experience and skills. Ultimately, the members of a peer panel are those who are empathetic and whose points of view, experiences or expertise are valued and respected.

With a facilitator, the consultation process efficiently satisfies the immediate needs of the client, if not the needs of those who provide it as well. The process enables peers to gather and share experiences, ideas and perspectives in ways that maintain one's privacy and self worth. During a peer consultation, the client is able to hear divergent points of view with a minimum of defensiveness. No participant dominates the process.

In a consultation, first the peers listen as the client describes her or his situation. Peers then clarify, express non-judgmental views, generate suggested solutions and offer feedback.

Presented below is a step-by-step description of the procedure for setting up and facilitating a peer consultation.

Why Participate In a Peer Consultation

- To improve one's effectiveness in specific situations.
- Gain insights into and "reality check" a specific matter.
- Hear how others have work through similar situations.
- Develop a personal improvement plan.
- Plan how to reduce the risk of mistakes and violated expectations.

- Foster learning and continuous improvement.

Roles in the Peer Consultation Process

1) The client is the person who requests a peer consultation and completes the following steps.

- Selects a facilitator
- Works with the facilitator to select the peer consultants
- Chooses and presents her or his situation of interest or concern
- Listens, clarifies, and confirms for understanding what peers offer (agreement is not required for understanding to occur)
- Is solely responsible for any follow-through actions.
- At the conclusion, summarizes what stands out as significant and most useful.

2) The peers are those who have agreed to meet with the client and give their input to the client's issue. The peers are expected to contribute in the following ways.

- Focus exclusively on client's situation or request.
- Listen, ask questions for clarification and seek to understand the client's interest or concerns.
- At the appropriate times, share personal experience, knowledge and skills related to the area of interest or concern to the client.
- Provide ideas useful for a deeper understanding of the situation and its resolution or movement.
- Avoid comments or feedback unrelated to the client's situation. Judgments, speculations and stereotypes are not useful. Personal criticisms are not permitted.

3) The "facilitator" is a person selected by the client to set up, help organize and guide the consultation process. The facilitator contributes in these ways.

- Promptly responds to a request for peer counsel – agree to either serve or decline.
- Helps the client identify a qualified peer group.
- Helps the client prepare for the presentation of her or his case situation.
- Preserves the context of acceptance and keeps the focus on the issue not the person: Assures the meeting follows to the consultation process, maintains the peer relationship and works toward a useful outcome.
- Help the client summarize the meeting at the end.
- Checks with the peer group at the end about what they have gained for themselves.

Expectations of Peer Consultation

Assemble this peer group for the purpose of this consultation. After this consultation, the peers are not expected to provide any added support.

The process structure is designed to maximize clear communication and to minimize power differences in work and personal relationships. Thus, a client may request their superior be a "peer" for the purposes of this consultation. To minimize differences in influence, the process design minimizes the effects of hierarchy, gender, race, education, prestige, expertise and some of the other trappings of status. Experienced and seasoned professionals can learn from novices as well as from other experts.

People sit in the round according to the client's needs, i.e. fishbowl; fly on the wall, or in another arrangement.

Groundrules

The peer panel members review these in advance of the consultation.

- The clients issues and situation are confidential, not be discussed outside this group.
- All participants are treated as colleagues, all at the same level.
- Confidentiality: The client, the client's issue, concerns and the outcomes of the consultation are confidential and not discussed with others outside of the consultation members.
- Relax personal constraints – Provide counsel in relation to what the client needs, not just what is feasible. The client decides what is feasible.
- Strive for brief, focused and clear remarks.
- Do not waste time by justifying one position or point of view.
- Avoid recycling and repeating the same comments.
- Listen as an ally, for understanding.

PEER CONSULTATION PROCESS:

Set Up

1. Client contracts with a facilitator.
2. Client and facilitator plan the logistics: Where, when, how, and who to invite.
3. Client invites peers.
4. Client and facilitator meet to prepare:
    a. The title, headline or summary statement that best describes the case or issue of concern.
    b. A brief summary of the case (2 to 3 sentences).
    c. Desired outcome(s) (It is useful to have these on a handout or easel).
    d. A description of the circumstances of the situation: Might include organization chart, process map, or other useful background information.

5. Send these items several days in advance. Some time a client presents the information at the start of the consultation.
6. The client may wish to have a recorder take notes.
7. The facilitator serves as the timekeeper and keeps the process on track. The facilitator also maintains the ground rules.

Meeting Agenda

First fifteen minutes: The client explains the situation and defines what success he or she is striving to realize.

- Facilitator manages the introductions and reviews the ground rules.
- The client gives a brief explanation of why she or he wants the peers' attention, why they were asked to participate and what he or she hopes to obtain from their input.
- The client states desired outcomes from this peer consultation, "What I would like to gain is…."
- The client presents the topic and an overview of the situation at hand – a brief summary, how she or he defines success in this situation, and description of the situation.
- The facilitator checks for understanding of the desired outcomes.

Next ten minutes: Clarification

- The peer panel members ask questions to gain more understanding of the topic of concern or issue. The client responds with further clarifications. The peer panel offers no advice, comments, feedback or reactions to the situation at this time.

20 minutes: Ideas and Solutions

- Given the client's situation, each member of the peer panel takes a turn sharing reactions and ideas for achieving the client's outcomes.
- The client takes notes quietly, only asking questions for clarification.
- A client may seek further information in order to explore the meaning of the peer panel members' comments. There is no need to argue or to defend any position or point of view. The client makes the ultimate decision choice of a solution anyway.

Closing ten minutes: Learning and Action Ideas

- The client restates only the most useful points she or he has heard and any actions intended. The client need not justify, defend or discuss her or his reasons for the ideas or suggestions selected.
- The peer panel members take turns briefly stating what they learned during the process. That is, they provide a briefly recap of what they each learned.
- The client thanks panel members and facilitator.

- The facilitator adjourns the session.

Follow Through

A short time after the consultation, the client notifies the peer panel members of what has happened because of engaging in the peer consultation session.

HANDOUT: Peer Consultation Meeting Agenda

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Groundrules

- The client's situation, facts and statements of concern are confidential, not to be discussed outside this group.
- Treat one another as colleagues, as equal authorities and resources for the client, with equal influence in this situation.
- Confidentiality: The client, the client's issue, concerns and the outcomes of the consultation are confidential and not discussed with others outside of those who participated.
- Relax personal constraints – provide counsel in relation to what is needed, not what is feasible. The client will decide what is feasible.
- Make remarks brief, focused, and clear.
- Do not take up time by justifying one position or point of view.
- Avoid recycling and repeating the same comments.
- Listen as an ally, for understanding.

PEER CONSULTATION PROCESS:

Set Up

- Client prepares the following content.
    - The headline.
    - Describes what a success would be in this situation.
    - A brief summary statement to describe the case or issue of concern (2 to 3 sentences)
    - The outcome(s) desired in this situation. It is useful to have these on handouts or easel paper.
    - A description of any special circumstances of the situation. This might include an organization chart, the major steps in a project plan or other background information, which will give a move complete picture of the context of the issue at hand.
- These items may be sent out in advance. Most often, however, the client presents the information at the consultation.
- The client may wish to have a recorder take notes.
- The facilitator serves as the timekeeper and keeps the process on track. The facilitator also maintains the ground rules.

Meeting Agenda

First fifteen minutes: Client explains the situation and defines what success she or he is striving to realize.

- Facilitator manages the introductions and reviews the groundrules
- The client gives a brief explanation: Why she or he wants the peers' input, why they were asked to participate and what he or she hopes to obtain from them.
- The client states desired outcomes from this peer consultation, "What I would like to gain is…."
- The client presents the topic and an overview of the situation at hand – a brief summary, how she or he defines success in this situation, and description of the situation.
- The facilitator assures the desired outcomes are clear to all.

Next ten minutes: Issue clarification

- The peer panel members ask questions to gain more understanding of the topic of concern or issue. The client responds with further clarifications.
- The peer panel offers no advice, comments, feedback or reactions to the situation at this time.

20 minutes: Ideas and solutions (This time may have to expand or contract depending upon the complexity of the issue and the number of members on the peer panel.)

- Each member of the peer panel takes a turn sharing their reactions and ideas for achieving the client's outcomes in this situation.
- The client takes notes and only asks questions for clarification.
- There is no need to argue or to defend any position or point of view – by either the client or a peer panel member. The client will make the ultimate choice of a solution.

Closing ten minutes: Learning and action ideas

- The client restates only the most useful points she or he has heard and any actions intended. The client need not justify, defend or explain her or his reasons for the learning points selected.
- The peer panel members take turns briefly stating what they learned during the process. That is, they provide a briefly recap what they learned.
- The client thanks panel members and facilitator.
- The facilitator adjourns the session.

Follow Through

After this peer consultation the client notifies the peer panel members of what has happened as a result of seeking peer consultation session: What solutions were chosen, what action was taken and what longer term benefit was gained from their input.

Notes

Opening

1. What are some concerns, problems or situations where we would like the input of others?
   a. Example: I have a difficult client and do not know how best to work with him or her.
2. Whom do we typically turn to for help with these issues?
   a. Coaches, consultants, friends, family members, therapists.
3. How successful have we been with our typical approach?
   a. They often may not understand the details of my situation. They do not have the technical expertise I need in order to address my situation.
4. What stops us from using our colleagues in consultations that are more private or coaching encounters?
   a. Power differences, status differences, trust issues, availability
   b. Not sure how they will use my information, or if they will keep my concerns confidential.
5. The Peer Consultation process was designed in order to provide an efficient, structured process for utilizing the talents we already have in our support groups and organizational units.