Beyond consulting: Awareness trumps telling

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«We need a consultant to make this change happen». We have heard it all. Consultants are hired for days of analytical work to solve a simple personnel problem. Data creates the facts that make the case for a decision on change. By hiring tough consultants, executives reinforce their dedication. But, it is a sign of weak management. Using consultant to cover for indecision and the lack of courage to lead has been the norm. But times have changed. Standardised exploitation and telling best practices are less in demand. Time has come for helping leaders find their own solutions. This is what we call beyond consulting.

There is visible evidence from the Big Five that times of prosperous consulting in areas such as cost cutting, execution, industry analysis and alike through hordes of juniors are up. These consultancies all diversify into the intangibles building capabilities for agile, transformation, digital, engagement and HR related issues.

But that is only an intermediate step towards the fundamental transformation of the consulting industry itself. As a leader, why would you want to continue to be told what to do by a consultant? Why would you continue to be asked questions from coaches without the experience of a leader? From every employee we expect self-responsible decisions and practical action. We hire only the best and trust them. So, why then do it differently when

it comes to yourself?

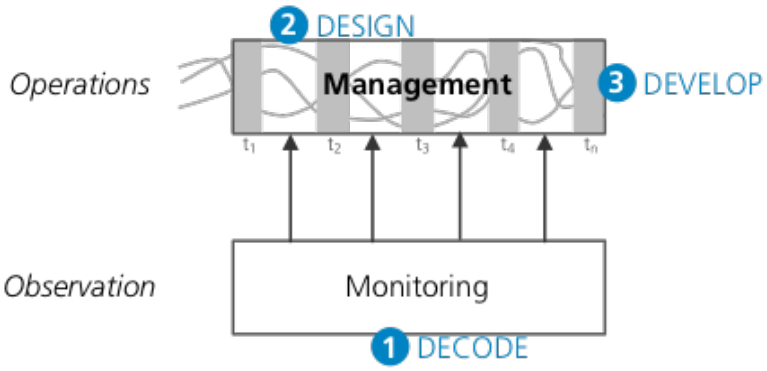
As a leader, being told what to do should immediately create resistance. It is the same change resistance that leaders experience from employees. Experienced leaders know that their motivation only comes from the own idea, solution, ambition. So, if telling does not work, what is the alternative?

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When we relate consulting to the discipline of management, then the alternative comes from combining 1) The inner game and 2) Dynamic capabilities. Non-judgemental awareness is the clue to both the Inner Game methodology that helps people to perform at their peak and dynamic capabilities, the institutional capabilities that enable an organisation to evolve without disruptive change.

The inner game, initially developed by Timothy Gallwey to help people learn new skills, is based on the principles of awareness, choice and trust. Focus of attention helps people to raise their awareness for what truly matters. Choice is the foundation for self-responsibility, and trust in the own skills is necessary to perform any task. In combination these factors facilitate rapid learning. Learning without awareness does not work. And, learning happens at the individual level. Effective leaders use the inner game principles to guide their teams.

Dynamic capabilities emerge through learning as a routine that frequently deals with change of capabilities and innovation. Dynamic capabilities are invisible. Cybernetics demand “second order observations” as the means to make such capabilities visible and malleable. Awareness comes through observation. It makes capabilities subject to reflection and thereby open to alternatives.



Management is a function and a capability. The inner game offers awareness to reach individual level of peak performance. Management is such a dynamic capability. Monitoring helps to decode its design. Observation raises the awareness for the things that need to develop in order to achieve what we call “better management”.

Both, the inner game and dynamic capabilities are not directly observable. They require indirect measurement. Monitoring as an institutionalised, rules-based reflection is a none-routine practice. And, the interpretation of observations with often weak signals requires skills.

Capability monitoring is a technology and skill that is too expensive to own. Monitoring is risk management. Decoding dynamic capabilities helps to prevent organisations from misapplying tools, ignoring critical events, or get threatened by changes in their operating context. Taking a distant stance, observation and critique of design and capabilities help to compensate for risks: the risks of un-reflected reproduction of organisational designs and capabilities through path dependency, structural inertia, and lock-in. Early warning systems include monitoring and reflection to help reduce these risks.

Management monitoring and design are such early warning systems that marks the path beyond traditional consulting. In the future, the consulting industry will likely offer more monitoring and collaborative design capabilities for leaders that do it at their own.

And, I personally hope for both, more executives that step up and enrol in the fast path to learning and performance, and research to combine the inner game and dynamic capabilities domains.

About Management Insights

Founded by Lukas Michel, Management Insights draws on more than 25 years of research and practice to help people understand how their organizations work. The Organization Twin brings organizational patterns into view for reflection, dialogue, and informed choice.

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