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### **Koans for Consultants: A Group Relations Consultation for the Novice in the Work**

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Working Papers and Publications



**Working paper**

## Koans for Consultants

### *A Guide to Group Relations Consultation for the Novice in the Work*

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*The novice entered the group and thought,*

*"I counted the chairs correctly and I began on time." As the group continued and the novice settled into the consultant seat for the very first time, the novice thought,*

*"I am present to the moment." Then the group members made statement after statement, confused and confronting each other about the task. Feeling frustration and recalling the words the consultant had learned, the novice spoke and thought,*

*"I am making an interpretation in the "here-and-now" without intention and desire." And so it continued for the remainder of the session, with the novice making more consultations and thinking,*

*"I am remembering 'the because' and I pause." Then the time boundary arrived with the novice thinking,*

*"I am ending the session on time." Filled with joy, the novice ran to staff room eager to report on the group. The director said to the novice, "How was your first time?"*

*The proud novice said, "I did everything I learned. I began and ended on time. I thought and felt. I was present to the "here-and-now". And there was a 'because clause' for every consultation."*

*The director smiled and said, "Congratulations you have indeed learned well and did everything that the texts require...and you have done nothing. I only hear you. Where is the group? Until the "I" And the group are as one within you, the group remains an illusion hidden behind the words of the Work.*

*Now remember to forget so that you may be present to consult."*

Consulting to "here-and-now" events in group relations conferences is a skill and art that takes numerous experiences to master. A koan is a lesson, the essence of some basic teaching about the way to mastery. In group relations work, one central metaphor has been that of the nautical navigator. From this perspective, when first in the role, new consultants may feel at sea, adrift amidst the storms of group forces, unconscious processes and projections. Without some means of grounding themselves, some novice consultants may find themselves drowned in a silent stupor. Still others may feel helpless when their attempts at interpretations are met with torrents that threaten to tear the group asunder. While experience may help calm the waters, until there is such, some simple navigational tools may help the novice find the way home.

The nautical metaphor is an apt one which was originated by Rioch and extended by Wells to characterize the group relations consultant role. Given that this brief article is directed more to the novice in the work, a different metaphor may be used to describe the process of becoming a consultant. In some Buddhist practices, the student gains mastery by learning first to sit in

silent meditation. Through learning to become progressively more aware of the moment, novices begin their journey along a path that begins with the mastery of meditation practice and continues through enlightenment. At the highest level, some of these novices eventually become masters who practice seeing the interconnection of all things and the flow of meaning in all moments.

Group relations consultation requires sitting in the awareness of the moment and attempting to give meaning to group life as it occurs. As with many other formation experiences where one seeks to become a master of a way of knowing, certain lessons must be learned by the student from the teacher. Group relations work is a way of seeing and knowing the world in an uncanny and unique way. The novice consultant must learn what it means to move into the role so that s/he may know what it is to leave it. This process is akin to the process of meditation where once the student is aware that s/he is meditating, s/he is no longer meditating. In group relations work, the student of the work learns the way by staying in the "here-and-now" moment after moment, constantly seeking to stay in a consciousness where authority, the group-as-a-whole and the unconscious are available for study. Through sitting in the chair and by learning lessons from teachers on the essence of the work, the novice moves towards mastery of the role without once more being at sea.

The words that follow are koans, of a sort, for group relations consultation. They should not be seen and are not meant to be a divine text. As with many Buddhist teachings, the purpose of the text is for the student not to need the text. The essence of group relations consultation is in the practice of the moment of the group not the words of the teacher. One who adheres too closely to what follows is not in the moment of the group and is grasping to a lesson that serves as a guidepost rather than the actual destination. Each student must find the unique path that s/he must journey when consulting to the "here-and-now." The lessons of your teachers are not your own. Each novice must find his or her own way.

## Key Koans

As stated previously, a koan is the essence of a lesson. Another way to think of koans is to liken them to aphorisms. These sayings, generated and distilled from experience in the work, help explain in simple terms something that is actually quite complex. Though often few in words, most koans reveal enough of what is needed for the novice to find and know a path for the work. Ultimately, however, it remains the consultant and the group, working as one, that determines the way.

Let us begin ...

*Consider "authority" the primary lesson-*

*After "the right to do work" is a matter of question.*

Group relations conferences in the United States are primarily, yet arguably, about the study of authority. Since 1965 when the first conferences in the Tavistock tradition were held here, some variant of "the study of authority and the problems encountered in its exercise" has been the stated primary task of the work. Nonetheless, many novice consultants were brought into the work under a different reality. Since 1990, theme conferences have proliferated. You may have participated in a conference entitled *Authority and ... Diversity, Identity, Gender, Spirituality, Whiteness, Learning, Passion, Race, Ethnicity, or Appearance ..* just to name a few examples. With such themes the primacy of authority can be lost or obscured, if not abandoned, unless consultants are quite careful. The study of authority is often a hated task and one for which most people may not have an extensive repertoire of practiced responses, including consultants. Taking up consultation to the exercise of authority requires patient acquisition of competence and skill. As with any area of study, it is often recommended that a novice begin with the classic

*Cryptic comments do not a consultant make-  
Offer the data for the members' sake.*

One of the chief criticisms of group relations work is that interpretations by consultants are cryptic. Such criticisms tend to be well founded in some instances because those in role on conference staffs offer no evidence for their observations. It is important to recall that the notion of the group as the unit of analysis is apt to be an alien concept to many, if not most, group members. Without the data that supports the consultation, uninitiated members have little hope of figuring out "what's going on" and experienced members cannot be enlisted to support the process. Indeed the tendency to neglect the data, when not attributable to inexperience on the part of the consultant, is typically a defensive stance used to preserve a sense of superiority, rather than authority, over the group.

*One comment is perhaps too few and ten, perhaps, may be too many-  
When providing interpretation to the group  
the space between the two is plenty.*

The number of interpretations to be offered in the course of a small group session is driven by the "here-and-now" process. There is no specific rule that can be used to say the proper number. Some would even argue that all that is needed for learning is the group, with or without consultation. Nonetheless, the novice consultant must find his/her voice in the group to enhance the learning of members. Anxiety can lead to a relatively silent stance or an over-active one. In either instance, it is more likely the consultant's internal process rather than the group's process that is driving the interpretations. If the moment has passed or does not come fast enough, focus must be on the now.

*Contempt compromises consultation.*

One sure sign that consultations are compromised is the degree of contempt expressed towards the members. While more common among more seasoned consultants who have "forgotten"

their days as member, novice consultants may also be "filled" with this contempt. Such contempt in novices typically arises out of a sense of powerlessness about how the members are working and using consultations. There is also often an internal sense of what "good" work would look like. Such thinking is illusory. It denies and neglects the experience of the *particular* group one is working with at that particular moment. If the contempt can be understood, or at least explored, as projected self-deprecation, the members will be free to learn with a consultant prepared to be present to the moment.

*The consultant who fails to be present in the moment  
Presents the moment to fail.*

While members are apt to learn regardless of what a consultant may be do, the quality of that learning may truly be a function of how present the consultant can be. When distracted by heated staff meeting dynamics, impinging intrapersonal issues, or any of a variety of other imports into the group, the moment is not present. Again, members may learn from such absence of presence. Nonetheless, the integrity of the container provided by the consultant role is largely dependent on the consultant staying in the "here-and-now" and calling the group again and again to the task. Once a consultant is aware s/he is not present, s/he has a responsibility to the group and the task to become present. Failing to do so is a failure in the role. In the worst instances, there may be members who become casualties of the process. Inattention to critical moments, once traced carefully and critically, can be found in toxic projections held by a member. In such dynamics a group member can be extruded from the group and exit the conference without adequate opportunity to metabolize their experience. Responsibility in the role requires that such failures are avoided whenever possible; otherwise casualties occur.

*The floor has no face-  
Face the group.*

Many novice and inexperienced consultants are floor-dependent. While the floor may provide important grounding and may help a consultant stay focused on the group-as-a-whole, the floor is not the group. Much of the data in the group is beyond the words spoken by members. Shifts of posture, arrangements of seats, mode of dress, attempts at eye contact, and many other elements of paralinguistic (nonverbal) communication provide key data about the group. When you face the group for the first time, it may be easy to leave the role and get caught in a dependency dynamic. The pull to make some sort of direct, interpersonal contact with the group will be tremendously high. You and the members will be attempting to ward off regression in the face of deprivation. Naturally, if *that* member reminds you of a former lover, a close friend, a despised adversary, or some other important figure in your life, *and* you are unable to get to the meaning of your experience *for the group*, the floor is an important refuge. You may use it to preserve the role. With experience, however, such moments simply become one more element in the interpretive field, potentially to be incorporated in the consultation process.

*Name it. Work it. Learn it. Repeat.*

The process of consultation often begins with naming a dynamic. *"The five women in the group have now spoken one after the other while the men remain silent."* This naming alone, while interesting, is not exactly an interpretation about the unconscious process of the group. In order to work what is named, an inference or preliminary hypothesis is required. " ... *and this may say something about how females are able to voice their authority in this group while men are mute--perhaps experiencing themselves as impotent.* In this example the observation becomes an interpretation that may or may not be explored by the group. What is key is that work is made available--and the group must decide how they will use their right to work ---their authority. The members learn by how they choose to take up the interpretation. They may ignore it, distort it, embrace it, debate it, or defer exploring it--just to name a few options. If the interpretation was good enough, it remains a part of the group life and will likely repeat itself. The consultant's task is to then move to the next moment and name more work for learning.

*When confused and way off track-  
Still yourself and find the task.*

Group relations life, when engaged authentically, will invariably bring members and consultants face-to-face with their unconscious. Though this experience is the norm, novice consultants may mistake such moments as some sort of failure. Quite the opposite is more likely the case. Something in the "here-and-now" enterprise has likely been activated in you and through you. Most likely the confusion is a reflection of your valence. As a consultant, however, you do have a role that requires you to contain the primitive affects and be mindful of any propensity to project one's shadow into the membership. More important, however, is to remind oneself of the task at hand. Once you lose your way, it is key to discover this as quickly as possible, acknowledge within, and find the task again. If you remain lost, it may simply be enough to state it and wonder what this may have to do with the group. If that still doesn't work, just remember the time boundary and be still. Sometimes the members are right but this *is* group relations. Don't forget that members will also relish in your symbolic death. Never hide that you got lost to your colleagues on staff, or you will be stuck holding those projections well after a conference is over.

*At moments of doubt and moments of fear-  
Say what you see and say what you hear.*

A corollary to the *be still* koan is to speak to what you see and hear. When you look and listen, there is often sufficient irrefutable data available for naming. The novice, at key moments may not be able to do much more than to offer these observations. When one is unclear about what is going on, simply verbalizing what you think you see may be enough. Typically, another layer of the group dynamic will soon present itself. Sometimes it's additional data in the form of affect. The emotional tone can be addressed similarly. If the novice is uncertain whether the fear, for instance, resides within themselves or within the group, the consultation may be as direct as, *"I am experiencing fear in this group but finding it difficult to locate."* If this is mere projection of the consultant's anxiety, the evidence will likely present itself through an absence of any members joining with the comment. More than likely, the fear has been lodged into one or two

members who will be relieved that it has been "seen."

*Silence is substance. Silence is relevance-*

*Treat those who hold it with proper reverence.*

Please remember that individual group members will have different propensities to respond in characteristic ways in the group. The novice consultant must discern these differences in valence. It is usually sufficiently challenging to attend to the group process as expressed by the verbal members. Given that the unit of analysis is the group, the silent members hold something on behalf of the group. The consultant must listen to the unspoken to find the substance and relevance of the silence. Often the silence is a reflection of the group unconscious, acting metaphorically as the unheard of the unseen. Discounting and disrespect for the silence may leave the consultant with largely erroneous interpretations about the group-as-a-whole. The silence may be resistance, reluctance, passive aggression, or calculation--but sometimes it is work. When it is work, those who speak are able to speak to what the silence holds on behalf of the group. In those moments their words are no longer expressions of anxiety but may be considered to be on behalf of the group. If this is incorrect, silence will leave your group.

*If no "because clause"- pause.*

A corollary to the *cryptic comment* koan, the "because clause" provides key data and the essence of the interpretation of the unconscious process. Absent the "because clause" the group consultant is being more of a process facilitator, helping but not necessarily providing opportunities for learning about the exercise of authority. When the novice consultant takes a moment to pause, s/he can offer some inference that the group may choose to explore. The pause also reduces a tendency to over-consultant, increasing the group's time to work with what has already been offered. When the "because clause" is dropped, let it be for those moments when a crisp reflection of the process will in itself provide learning for the group.

*Begin and end on time-and count the chairs-*

*The learning between is yours and theirs.*

There are certain basic parts of group relations consultation that merit attention. If the novice consultant does nothing else; even if s/he does not make a single interpretation, keeping the time boundary and counting the chairs correctly provides key elements of a "good enough" container for learning. In doing so, there is a sufficient field for the work to begin. When time boundaries are missed and the chairs are miscounted by the consultant, there is rich dynamic information about the meaning of such errors. It becomes necessary to *double check everything twice* to make the subject of the group something other than tardiness and tawdriness by the consultant.

*Begin without memory, intention or desire-*

*For this the role does most require*

The original admonition by Bion was to work *without intention or desire*. His words are no less true today for the novice consultant. The stoic interpretive stance taken by many consultants is used to assure that intention and desire are not detected in the process. When this stance is held successfully, members of have a blank screen for their projections. Though affective displays are more typical in consultants today, there is still no room for the consultation to be tainted by the wish for the members to learn in some prescribed, intended fashion. Further, to the degree that a consultant is using memory of the group to provide interpretations, s/he cannot be said to be in the moment. To the degree that memory, intention and desire can be recognized within oneself and held at bay may be the degree to which the consultant can sustain the role.

*Think and feel, not neglecting one for the other-*

Perhaps no other words characterized the work of the consultant more than those that call for the dynamic balance between affect and intellect. Respecting and expecting the need for thinking and feeling, by its nature, is a call for an integrated experience. If consultants are to model anything for the members, it is the capacity to express emotional cognizance of a given moment in group life. The novice will soon realize that this process is in the proverbial category of "easier said than done." The role requires progressively evolved competence in making it so.

*If no "art" - turn to BART.*

One day you may hear stories of people in the work that include tales of this or that interpretation. These words of some particular consultant are remembered because they particularly captured a moment in group life. Most often it was the eloquent artistry, subtle irony, deep empathy, rich intellect, or poignant emotion-are all of these at once that profoundly moved the staff and the group. Such moments of finding the most meaningful metaphor, incisive interpretation, or agile analogy are rare. The novice who is waiting for such a moment is assuredly caught in ego and desire, perhaps even off task. While waiting for *that* brilliant insight, the neophyte should keep BART handy. BART is the acronym for *boundary, authority, role, and task*. In group relations life it is practically invariable for there not to be some challenge to one of these elements at any given moment: If it is not happening "here-and-now," be patient... The art will come. Use BART.

*When the task is lost or dropped-*

*Check the group to find what's FOPD.*

FOPD (pronounced "fopped") is an acronym for the basic assumption groups. A group will avoid the task of studying its own behavior through *fight-flight, oneness, pairing, and dependency*. The novice consultant must remember that basic assumption life can also be used in service of the task. In the beginning it may be hard to tell when this is happening. Therefore, concentrate attention on whether there is basic assumption life happening at all in the group. Feel assured it is. If the group seems off task, then determine which task avoidance strategy or combination of

strategies are being used. If you say *"the group is using pairing"* or *"there is a oneness dynamic masking deep dependency longings,"* you may sound smart but are as apt to be discounted for speaking psychobabble. Remember the *cryptic comment* koan and give the data needed to promote learning.

*If you seduce and betray-*

*You lose your role and lose your way.*

One of the more subtle and potentially toxic elements of group relations life is when consultants *unconsciously* seduce and betray members. The process is one whereby consultants "select" members to carry consultant projections. Consultants invite, entice, and seduce the group, and thereby the selected members, to do work that reflects the unexpressed shadowy and primitive sides of the consultant. When the members, who likely have valences for such projections, begin to enact behaviors that express the consultant's more primal nature, the group will be admonished for its actions through interpretations. The feelings of shame generated in the group, carried by individual members, are in part due to their inability to locate the origin of the projections. The consultant "gets away" with this betrayal, so long as s/he remains unconscious about their participation in the dynamic. Quite obviously, this process is particularly dangerous to the psychic life of members. It is the most serious of all role violations *if the consultant becomes aware of their participation in the seduction/betrayal and takes no action*. When and if possible, the consultant **MUST** take back these projections to reduce the prospect of creating casualties. Novice consultants may need to ask for help if they feel they are caught in such a dynamic.

*Consultants make errors-*

*Errors make consultants*

Novice consultants must recognize they will fall out of role, miss boundaries, lose the task, and feel stripped of all authority. Genuine psychotic moments are not uncommon. And you will make errors: tracking the data, following a dynamic, attributing a comment, counting the chairs, hearing what was said, seeing what is before your eyes-to name a few. The focus is not on errors as failures, though some may be. The important point is to work with the errors and discover their meaning for the group-as-a-whole. What do you gain and the group gain for your lapse into incompetence and incomprehension? If there is resiliency in the face of such errors, marked by a capacity to think and feel in an authentic way in such moments, the quality of consultation is markedly enhanced. The novice consultant must not take this thinking as license to be careless. Rather, these words are a way to recall our humanity and our assurance of facing many moments of error and failure. While we are not to seek them, once errors are made we are to speak to them and learn what we will.

They must learn as they learn. If we meet the responsibilities of our role, we have done our job. Accordingly, each novice consultant must walk the path alone, with those who are more experienced available when s/he stumbles and falls. You

will fall. Get up.