

# Paradox and Consulting

*about non-fighting interventions for dealing with resistance in the consulting process<sup>1</sup>*

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*Sometimes a consultation process grinds to a standstill, although the consultant's contributions seem flawless. A typical pattern of behavior evolves: the more the consultant tries to help, the more his client resists that intervention. The typical temptation for consultants in such situations is to 'fight' for the acceptance of their sound advice. This article, however, explores communicational dynamics. It suggests that the interaction problem often can be better dealt with using a paradoxical approach of helping with 'non-helping' interventions.*

## 1. The consultant and his client

In general, the premises of a consulting relationship can be summarized as follows: the client has a problem, the consultant is an expert and both work together to do something about the problem. As trivial as this might seem, these premises are terms of mutual understanding. They create a set of rules which makes both partners' efforts meaningful. They can be formalized in some kind of written, or verbal contract.

However, as Watzlawick<sup>2</sup> points out, the rules of human interaction do not always follow verbalized intentions. There is also the process of *behaviorally ordering relationship*, which happens in ongoing interaction. In fact, all human interaction reveals a steady flow of verbal and nonverbal information about the

	Client	Consultant
Expressive aspect	'I have a problem'	'I am an expert'
Attributive aspect	'You are an expert'	'You have a problem'
Command aspect	'Help me to solve the problem'	'Accept my (temporary) leadership in order to solve the problem'

interacting parties' stand towards each other. Watzlawick called this the *metacommunicative* aspect of communication. It entails messages about (1) how partners want to be perceived themselves (expressive aspect), (2) how they perceive each other (attributive aspect) and (3) what they want each other to do (command aspect)<sup>3</sup>. Returning to the basic premises of a consulting relationship, we would expect a number of characteristic messages to be exchanged between a client and his consultant (see scheme 1).

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: J. Hendriks, 'Lastige klanten, een interactioneel perspectief', published in *M&O* (41/1) 1987, pp. 6 - 21

<sup>2</sup> Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. & Jackson, D., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Norton, New York 1967

<sup>3</sup> cfr. Schulz von Thun, F., 'Psychologische Vorgänge in der Zwischenmenschliche Kommunikation', in: Fitkau F., Muller-Wolf, H. & Schulz von Thun F., *Kommunizieren Lernen (unt Umlernen)*, Westerman, Braunschweig 1977

Of course, the scheme is sketchy and only represents a simplified reality: in actual cases all kinds of meaning will be added. In this article, however, we consider this scheme as a *model* of consulting relationship. It describes a situation in which the metacommunicative messages of a client and his consultant 'fit' smoothly together and represent the basics of their working together.

Not always is reality so easy. Let us look at some examples of less successful metacommunication between clients and consultants.

(1) *'It's not my problem'*. Sometimes a client's expressive message suggests there *is* indeed a problem, but not the client's problem. This client typically presents himself as the consultant's principal. He talks about others in the organization who are seen as having, or causing problems. The consultant is then asked to 'do something about it'. What this *something* precisely entails is usually kept vague and the client wearily directs all questions about it back to the consultant's expertise: 'I don't want to get involved in that: that's what we hired you for'. This client takes upon himself the role of a responsible outsider, who has fulfilled his obligations by hiring an appropriate expert.

Of course such a 'principal' role can be quite functional, if indeed the client had no part in the development of problems and they can be solved without his cooperation. Trouble is ahead, however, when this client *has* a share in causing problems and at the same time does not want to get involved. In that case the problem solving process can be stymied.

(2) *'I doubt your expertise'*. This metacommunicative message is usually expressed in one of two ways. One is the client who always knows things better. He talks a great deal, preferably in the abstract, so that even after a great many words his precise meaning remains unclear. When a consultant tries to summarize his words, this client typically reacts with a correction. Unfortunately, this correction - usually prefaced with '... you haven't understood' - is either trivial, or involves so many shades of meaning that the end result is still confusing. Further along in the consulting process, this type of client may let his consultant know that while he values the consultant's 'theoretical contribution', he does not think it applies to the actual situation.

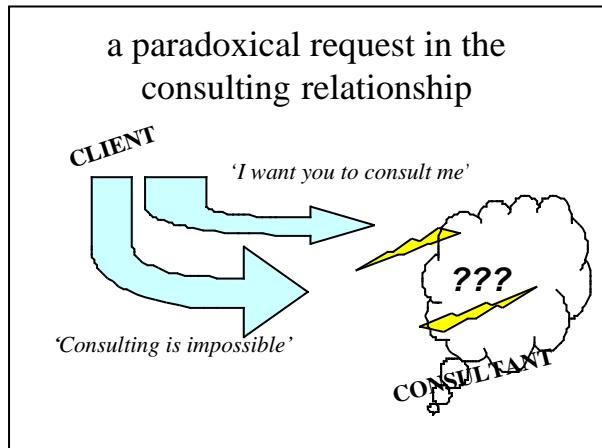
Another variation on 'I doubt your expertise' is expressed in the derogative terms which some clients use to convey their low regard of what consultants generally have to offer. A typical remark might go like this, '... look, we're running a production unit here and thus don't need (what usually follows is a description of the consultant's field of specialization) .. we expect something else of you'. It is typical for these clients to continually challenge their consultants to prove that they can rise above these rather low expectations.

(3) *'It's hopeless, nothing can be changed here'*. At first sight this client seems to be much less of a fighter than the previous two. Indeed, he even preferably agrees with his consultant. However, this client's *weapon* against consultant's influence is his very helplessness. He would, after all, do anything to solve his problem, but all his efforts prove in vain. He blames this failure on others, or on '... I can't help it, it just happens to me everytime'. In a similar way, this client may forget appointments with his consultant, or does not fulfil his obligations for a variety of unclear reasons. The consultant's temptation in this situation is to continually encourage this seemingly willing client to keep trying and hang on. The failures, however, are part of a pattern and might in the end be used against the consultant: '... I tried everything you told me, but nothing worked'.

The clients in these examples send some model communicative messages to their consultants, but they complicate these messages by *denying* at least one of them. Since we identified three types of metacommunicative messages - expressive, attributive and command - there are also three areas in which such *reversal* of the relational aspect may occur. They are prototypically shown in the examples.

### The paradoxical request

The denial is not the whole message, sent by these clients to their consultants. After all, why hire a consultant, if one really doubts his expertise? Why talk with a consultant about change, if one truly knows that to be impossible?



There is thus a *double message* involved: the client asks for an advice, but at the same time makes it clear that he in fact does not expect - or want - much to come of it. This is a complicated message, even more so as the last part is often *covert*. It can be implied by means of a joke, or is expressed in nonverbal behavior or the manner in which the client reacts to his consultant.

Looked at it this way, the client's request for advice can be summarized as in scheme 2.

## 2. The paradoxical request and the consulting struggle

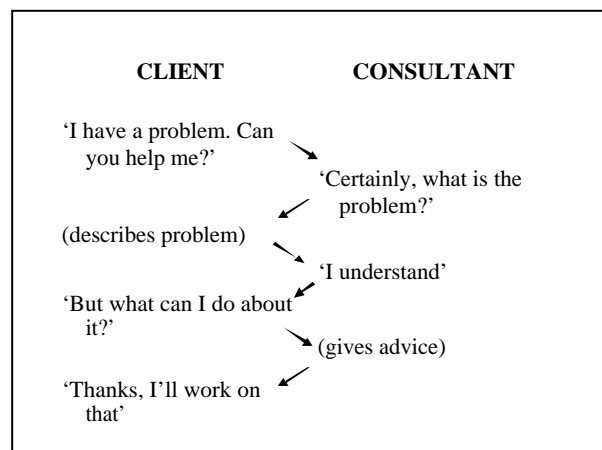
A paradox like this complicates the work of a consultant. How should one behave, if one is expected to be both expert and incompetent at the same time? Which advice is useful when all advice is supposed to fail? The vulnerability of consultants to such paradoxical requests is partially due to their professional attitude, which counsels them to understand their clients' messages and base their strategy upon them. No easy job in the situations described.

### Conscious recognition

One problem for consultants is that even *diagnosing* paradoxical requests can be very difficult, since it requires a conscious recognition of the client's nonverbal and covert messages. Such conscious recognition usually comes late. Before the paradox is fully seen and understood, it is usually felt in headaches or other physical sensations (clammy hands, stomach aches, dizziness, etc.), signs that somewhere something is going wrong without our knowing exactly what.

### Behavioral response

Let's turn now to the behavioral question: what happens, when consultants are confronted with a paradoxical denial? Again, the process with a *model* client is first presented as a contrast. This is, again, a simplified sketch. All actual consultations would include many intermediate steps, repetition of steps (etc.). However, our main concern here is the smoothness of com-



munication. Watzlawick would call this *complementarity*, a quality of interaction which shows both partners to be in full agreement about the terms of their relationship. There is no misunderstanding here on such questions as ‘who is expert?’, ‘who has a problem?’, ‘what should be done?’, etc.

When such agreement is absent, a very different pattern of communication evolves in which often much less smoothness can be found. We illustrate this in the next example, in which the client’s communication reveals a combination of *expressive* and *attributive* denials (‘I have no problem’ and ‘I doubt your expertise’).

#### *Case 1. First Consultation*

The client, who is head of a department, explains that his middle-management needs a course in conference techniques. He finds his meetings with them inefficient and not businesslike enough. Discussions usually take up a lot of time and not enough gets done.

- C : What do you think should be included in this course?  
Cl: Well, uhh, the usual things. The techniques you need in business meetings .. how to take minutes .. the usual. I confer with my own staff regularly and we use those sorts of technique. Middle-management will have to learn them too.  
C : Have you consulted them about this possible content of the course?  
Cl: No, I want to present them with a clear-cut proposal.  
C : Uh-huh, what would you say to sitting down and talk about that with them ? Just to get an idea of .. let’s see .. an idea of what they think about it, how they feel about the problem and what could be done about it?  
Cl: (interrupts) Listen, you are using words now that really give me the creeps. It’s too vague. The problem after all is very clear: conference techniques for middle-management. It’s as simple as that. Can you come across ?  
C : Well, that really would depend upon some things. For me it is important to understand the problem first and then...  
Cl: (interrupts again) .. understand the problem first... I don’t think we understand each other. The problem is clear as crystal ... (repeats bis previous points) .. and we want to change that. That’s why we chose an institute like yours and now I’m asking you again: do you have a course in conference techniques?

The consultant in this case wanted to explore the problem, but the client had already found an answer. We are not concerned now with the *content* of that difference of opinion. The interaction, after all, would probably have been much the same if the client had wanted to explore the problem and the consultant had offered him a ready-made course. What does concern us is the relational communication between this client and his consultant:

- in answer to the client’s expressive message (‘I found a solution to my problem’), the consultant reacted with a disqualifying attributive message: ‘perhaps you came up with the wrong solution’;
- in answer to the client’s attributive message, ‘I regard you as the future implementor of my idea’, the consultant reacted with the expressive message: ‘such is not my way of working’;
- in reaction to the client’s command message, ‘accept my leadership’, the consultant insisted: ‘you should accept *my* leadership’.

In this example, thus, we see a struggle on three fronts about the terms of the relationship. In fact, these parties disagree on both the roles of the consultant and the client. Inevitably therefore the question rises, ‘who’s boss around here?’. Interestingly enough, this struggle became

clear in the course of the first few sentences. The rest of the conversation amounted to a repetition of previous moves and countermoves.

Before drawing anymore conclusions, we present a further illustration of a relational struggle between a client and his consultant. This second case concerns a client, whose past experiences have convinced him that nothing can change his pityfull situation (the *third* denial), and who maintains this conviction despite his consultant's opinion to the contrary (the *second* denial).

*Case 2: A disappointed member of the organization*

- Cl: I still think all our problems now are due to that reorganization which hit us three years ago.
- C: Yes, you mentioned that point earlier. But don't you think that the most important thing now is to see what can be done to improve the situation at this moment?
- Cl: Look, I haven't forgotten what happened here! That former CEO of ours ruined everything we'd built up and let everybody down. Nobody could do anything right. I hate that man!
- C: But thats all in the past. It's obvious that things went wrong then, but don't you think that by now...
- Cl: (sulking) I have nothing to add to what I've already said.

This case too reveals a struggle about relationship. The client insists 'I know what is important' (the past), but his consultant disagrees: 'you talk besides what is important' (the present). In the same way the consultant's expressive messages ('I am an expert, willing to help you') is rejected. Last but not least, each party's command message is identical: 'stop with what you're doing: you'd better listen to *me*'.

### The symmetric deadlock

Both examples show a pattern of *symmetrical* communication, which tends towards a deadlock. The client and the consultant *pull* on their relationship - disagreeing on the it's terms - but neither wins. Instead, they force each other and themselves into an exceedingly uncomfortable position<sup>4</sup>.

#### The interaction deadlock

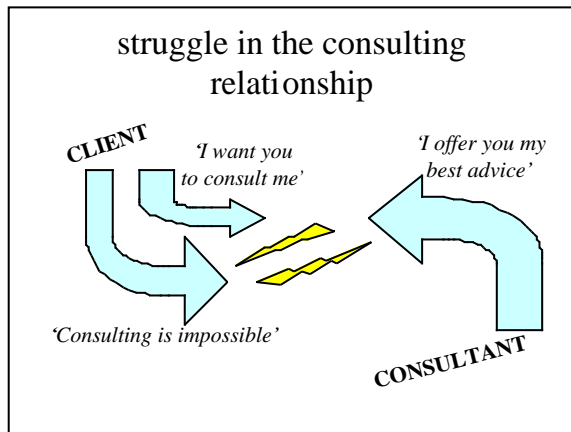


- metacommunication struggle dominates exchanges on content
- behavior: more of the same
- unchangeability breeds frustration
- predictable sequence: fighting, 'soldiering on', giving up...

Symmetric deadlocks are a major pitfall when a client and his consultant don't agree on the terms of their relationship. The consulting process in such situations easily grinds to a standstill, because disagreement about questions such as 'who is expert?' or 'who leads?' colors every interaction. In the most typical of cases the consultant keeps behaving *as if* he is involved in the 'model' consultation process (showing expertise, taking the lead, etc.). The client, however, resists those efforts.

Both parties' behavior is fully understandable, when considered from their own perspective. The consultant, after all, offers his advice because the client asked for it. The client however perceives this as an *incomplete* reaction to his ambiguous request: the 'covert' part of it is neglected, even bluntly thwarted. The client therefore does, what humans customarily do

<sup>4</sup> The illustration of both sailors is borrowed from Watzlawick et al. (1967)



when their intentions are misunderstood: he emphasizes and enlarges his neglected message, until it is heard. If a consultant then perceives this as an undermining of his consulting efforts - as consultants easily might do - a vicious circle can be set in motion: the harder the consultant does 'his work', the harder his client will try and force that to a stand still.

### 3. The consultant's dilemma

The examples presented thus far range from 'heavy weight' and perhaps chronic (the prototypical examples in par. 1) to 'small scale' and perhaps repairable (such as the dialogues in par. 2). Their common element, however, is that they confront the consultant with a dilemma: how to escape a vicious circle, in which *offering one's best advice* only promotes struggle?

Let us first consider an alluring possibility which unfortunately seldom yields result, namely, *explaining* the disastrous interaction to the client in the hope of making clear that this interaction must be ended. Typically this intervention will not work, because it is another way of *offering one's best advice*. Most clients will - accurately - perceive the explanation as another attempt by their consultant to influence them, prove expertise (etc.). They will therefore react with their own brand of *more of the same* behavior ('this is not my problem', 'you don't understand', 'don't try to make me believe that', etc.) and the struggle will continue. The intervention fails, because it aims at continuing the consulting process, exactly what is not possible in this situation.

In another alternative, the consultant might contemplate *leaving* the whole situation, as the client clearly shows resistance and apparently doesn't want advice. In fact this often happens (as it was shown in scheme 4): it is part of the dynamics of a deadlock that feelings of frustration soon or later drive one to *give up* and in this way escape the circle. It is not an easy solution, though, nor one which a conscientious consultant will happily consider. After all, the client *did* present a problem and the consultant *is* an expert - notwithstanding what goes on - who feels capable to solve it. Even worse for conscientious consultants, leaving one's client in this situation would imply neglecting the appeal which was also part of the ambiguous request: the client *is* resisting, but he is *also* asking for advice.

Caught in such a rigmarole of not being able to consult nor to leave the situation, a consultant might feel trapped in the professionally *unthinkable* position of having to stay on as a consultant without offering consult. Strange as it might seem, this (counter)paradoxical alternative often indeed offers a solution. After all, the consultant in this way ends his contribution to the nonproductive struggle. In the next paragraphs we present some examples.

### 4. Counterparadox (1): stop doing what consultants usually do

Stop struggling! Watzlawick's comment on the sketch of the two sailors was that one of them would have to do something seemingly unreasonable, namely sit *inside* the boat and so unbal-

ance the existing equilibrium. This forces his partner to change position, to keep from falling overboard. Only in this way will both sailors end up safe and comfortable with each other on board.

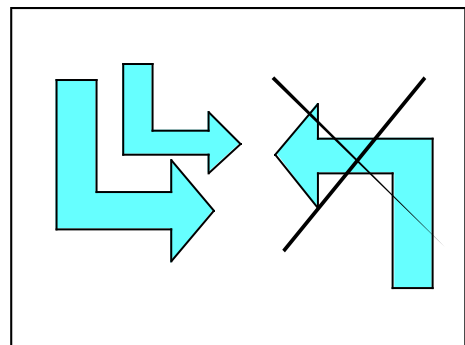
This is the quintessence of a light-weight counterparadox. An illustration can be found in the next dialogue, a variation on 'case 1'. The consultant here *confirms* the relational messages of his client ('you are the expert', 'you take the lead') and then some miracle occurs: the client suggests to his consultant, that his earlier proposals may be changed after talks with middle management.

*Case 3: First Consultation*

- C : Have you consulted middle-management about the possible content of the course?  
Cl: No, I want to present them with a clear-cut proposal.  
C : Yes, sometimes that's the best thing one can do...  
Cl: But understand me well. When you talk with them, they might come up with new ideas. We should listen to those too. The point is that such a discussion needs a starting point, a clear proposal

'Non-fighting' behavior *vis à vis* ambiguous clients mostly amounts to *not* doing what consultants customarily do: taking the lead and demonstrating high-power expertise. The basic profile is *low key* - not too expert, friendly interested and sincerely happy after understanding something in the client's complex world. The TV-character, inspector Columbo could serve as an example of this basic profile. Some practical notes about this role in consultation process:

**Asking Questions.** There is an important difference between a general open question as: '... could you tell me something more about that?', and more directive questions like, 'since when ...?', 'what about ...?' or 'and what did you do when ...?', etc. Although the *content* of the latter questions need not be judgmental or in any sense preconceived, their *relational* impact is important. The consultant namely implies his expertness: 'I know which questions must be asked here' and 'I know what I need to know'. Such questions are better left unasked when a client sees himself as expert. The best questions with such expert clients are as open and as *inexpert* as possible.



**Uh-huh reactions.** Consultants typically use 'uh-huh' to indicate, that they are following their client's account and understand it. 'Uh-huh' also serves as an encouragement to go on. The simply uttering of 'uh-huh' therefore contains relational messages of expertness ('I understand you') and suggests a leading role ('go on, you're on the right track'). This can be *fighting language* when a consultant's leadership and expertise are under struggle.

**Summarizing.** The same thing goes for summarizing. Of course this is a useful consultation method with most clients, but it is not one in 'troublesome' moments. Summarizing, after all, implies expertise and leadership and can - again - invite a struggle. Good summaries can instead be obtained by asking, 'how would you - in one or two words - summarize what you just told?'. Or they can be presented in a non-expert way: '... I think you told me quite a story!'.

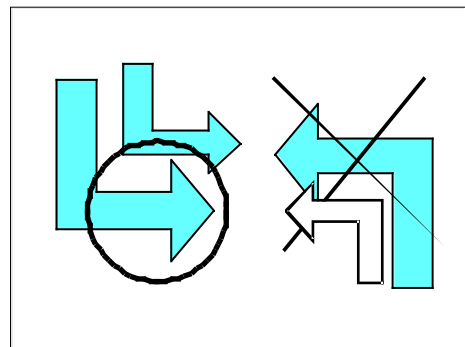
Sometimes non-expert and non-leading behavior are not enough to prevent struggles. With clients who communicate the *third* denial - 'I don't have a problem' - a non-fighting consul-

tant also may have to refrain from all signs of seriousness and *gravity* which normally belong to his professional stand. The complementary reaction here would be, ‘... so you don’t have a problem: well let’s just *talk* and nothing more’.

**Platitudes** are powerful to produce this atmosphere of ‘small-talk’. A remark like ‘... yes, sometimes that’s the best thing one can do’ (case 3) was meaningless enough to clearly show this client that the consultant did not see a problem. Platitudes dissolve tension and facilitate communication by creating a safe ‘common ground of triviality’. Confronted with this soothing tone, a client may feel obliged to emphasize the gravity of his situation. A pattern is then broken.

## 5. Counterparadox (2): exploring the reversal message

The basic struggle in the deadlock is about the ‘reversal message’ (par. 1), the communication from the client which contradicts and thwarts consultant’s efforts. In the heat of battle, consultants often go long ends fighting this inconvenient message (reasoning why it is wrong, putting contradictory ‘truths’ against it, etc.). Seldom do they show their interest in what’s exactly meant or - maybe more important - what could be behind it. Yet, showing one’s full interest in this very message often is a powerful way to stop the struggle. It requires, of course, the consultant’s skill and willingness to show genuine interest - even if the area feels uncomfortable - and to signal in non-judgmental ways that one *has* observed the reversal message.



### *Case 4: A disappointed member of the organization*

- Cl: I still think all our problems now are due to that reorganization which hit us three years ago.
- C: Yes, you mentioned that point earlier. These things have a long life, don’t they?
- Cl: I haven’t forgotten what happened here! That former CEO of ours ruined everything we built up and let everybody down. Nobody could do anything right. I hate that man!
- C: You’re saying that he still prevents you from looking into future?
- Cl: ....
- C: Would you like to explain something more about that?
- Cl: Yes, but what?
- C: Anything you want
- Cl: Yes, but ... well, it’s in the past. Maybe there’s not much point in talking about it now.

Exploring the reversal message eliminates the client’s need to *fight* for what he deems important. Instead, the consultant’s interest in this message presents him with a some kind of mental *mirror* in which his ambiguities are projected. Often, a client on such moments decides between the two parts of his message towards the consultant.

## 6. Counterparadox (3): driving logics to their end

*Driving logics to their end* is a variation of a judo technique. Instead of blocking a client’s move, one accepts it, even ‘taking over’ its momentum. The client - in this intervention - is encouraged to take his actual communication to its logical and ultimate conclusion. If this

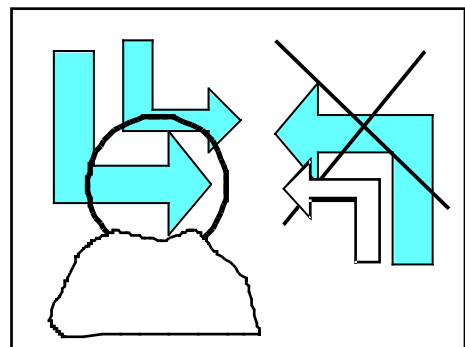
technique is kept up long enough, most clients will soon or later feel obliged to tone down some 'denials'. Case 5 - with a stronger variation of the counterparadox as was presented in case 4 - provides an example.

*Case 5: A disappointed member of the organization*

- Cl: I still think all our problems now are due to that reorganization which hit us three years ago.
- C: Yes, you mentioned that point earlier. These things have a long life, don't they?
- Cl: I haven't forgotten what happened here! That former CEO of ours ruined everything we built up and let everybody down. Nobody could do anything right. I hate that man!
- C: These memories still haunt you, don't they?
- Cl: Well, in fact they do not always. He's gone and I live my life now: normally I don't think back about those times. It's just that when you start asking such questions about reorganisation it all comes back to mind.
- C: ... Is there a way I could prevent that?
- Cl: I wouldn't know. But maybe it's not that important: it's your work to ask these questions. It's my work to answer them. I just hope we don't get in the sorry mesh we came in some years ago.
- C: Could you please explain that...
- Cl: Well, it would mean in the first place that ... (continues about what he thinks should happen)

'These memories still haunt you..' was only a slight aggravation of what was communicated just before. Still the consultant here was looking *for some part of the iceberg which he didn't see before* and he invited the client to show it. This is the quintessence of this 3<sup>d</sup> kind of counterparadox.

The technique can be appropriate with clients who are stuck in their rigid perceptions of a problem. More often than not the contact of these clients with their working environment has become increasingly difficult, because other people have heard their story too often to still be interested. As these clients were thus avoided more and more, they became distrustful. They learnt to judge their fellow people according to reactions to their story: '... if you don't believe me, you must surely be against me'. The *aggravation* technique was based here on the hypothesis, that this client's rigidity of opinion did not only *cause* his isolation, but that it also received a constant nourishment from this entrenched pattern of interaction. Looked at in this way, it is necessary to join this client in his 'trench', because otherwise he will never be able to leave it.



**Positive labeling.** The effect of *driving logics to their end* can often be increased by positive labeling: complimenting clients on their 'special' contribution. One can thus compliment a gruff, curt client on his succinct presentation (asking him then to summarize it '...in one word. ..'). In the same way a vague speaker can be complimented on his carefully balanced appraisals of the situation, and then be invited to complicate things even further: 'I'm sure there are still other aspects that you have not touched on yet'. Similarly, when speaking with a pessimist one might encourage him to count disasters, while an incorrigible optimist can be invited to explore every dimension of his 'real' desires.

The idea is to achieve a *reversed symmetry*. In any of these cases, the consultant does not ask his client to 'behave' - as his environment has done. Instead, he enjoins him to exaggerate, until this client has had his fill himself.

'Driving logics to their end' can also be useful in situations where a client is continually critical of the consultant's achievements. Continually defending oneself does not help. It is often better to accept the situation and demand an even harsher criticism. The following two examples illustrate the difference between defending oneself and 'asking for it'.

*Case 6: Criticism of a Report (first variation)*

- Cl: Well, now I have to say something unpleasant. You have been here three months and I expected you to produce more than a report like this. Last time I asked you to rewrite your text, but what I'm looking at now isn't much better. I'll spare you the details, but this report is still a recap of what we all already knew - that's not what we asked for.
- C: (alarmed) Oh, I didn't expect this. I went through the text very carefully and I thought I'd corrected what we talked about last time. But ...
- Cl: Well, that's not my opinion and, unfortunately, I'm not surprised. You should realize that we pay you an enormous fee and thus expect something in return. Your work is not up to our standards.
- C: Let's not get carried away, what exactly is your criticism of my new report?
- Cl: This question illustrates the point: you shouldn't have to ask. I'm really wondering whether it's wise for you to continue working here.

*Case 7: Criticism of a Report (second variation)*

- Cl: Well, now I have to say something unpleasant. You have been here three months and I expected you to produce more than a report like this. Last time I asked you to rewrite the text, but what I'm looking at now isn't much better. I'll spare you the details, but this report is still a recap of what we all already knew - that's not what we asked for.
- C: Wow..., you seem **very** disappointed.
- Cl: Yes, we pay you an enormous fee and expect something in return. This is not up to our standards.
- C: Your criticism goes further than just this report, doesn't it?
- Cl: I don't know. Look, even if what you've written now is true, it doesn't meet the point. It's the way this whole change project is going. Everywhere results come much less easy than I earlier expected.
- C: **And** you expected more of me!
- Cl: Exactly! That is what I want to talk about. This report is not the most important. What I want to talk to you about is how to get things moving. That's the bottom line, if we could do that...

## 7. Counterparadox (4): prescribing the resistance

*Prescribing* is about future. In this intervention, the consultant does show interest in the present, but he also suggests that - at least for the time being - there is no other choice. Prescribing is therefore a 'heavy-weight' intervention, to be used in very stubborn moments, and to be put in effect cautiously.

In the following example, the client presses his consultant for solutions but at the same time shows a strong conviction that his problem is insoluble (the 'third' denial). The consultant takes this latter message seriously and in the end responds by saying: '... if you're right, your

problem *won't* be easily solved'. In general, taking such position forces clients to make a choice in what they want:

*Case 8: 'Yes, we'll need lots of time to solve this'*

The client, a busy and responsible head of a department, complains about the amount of work he has to put into correcting outgoing documents. He is all for delegating tasks and has sincerely tried but, as he found out, his workers just do not deliver the kind of quality he stands for. In this dialogue, the client has just finished telling his consultant about his fruitless attempts to delegate tasks and how, time after time, he finished up endlessly correcting the results.

- C : It sounds to me, like you've tried everything a reasonable person could think of. You've really got a problem.
- Cl: But what can I do ?
- C : I don't know. Frankly, I'm impressed with what you've already done so far. And I appreciate your honesty about what didn't work. Few people would...
- Cl: That's no help. Look, I ask you for solutions. Of course, I've done a lot. I asked for reinforcement - a good assistant. I did that a long time ago, but it proved impossible. In these times, it's always less and never more...
- C : So that didn't help either...
- Cl: The question is, what can I do ?
- C : I really don't know. If I've understood you, I'm inclined to think you shouldn't count on much improvement. Aren't you afraid, that things might even still get worse in the future?
- Cl: But that's impossible!
- C : Well, seeing all the things that you've already tried... and all the things that haven't worked. I think you should realize that it might happen.
- Cl: (shrugs)
- C : The key point is: maybe you've got only one choice: either to learn and *live* with this whole situation - something I could help you with - *or* to accept that no simple and straightforward solutions do exist. That we need time and lots of effort to explore them.
- Cl: How?
- C : I can't tell you now, but we might find out together. The only thing I know at this moment is that - for the immediate future - you'd better forget about all efforts to improve things. You tried that, and it didn't work. It's time to change direction, and think the other way. Let's first look at how much work the situation creates for now and how much extra work you can expect in future. I think that only if we do that - and don't dream of immediate answers - we might be able to analyze and talk about how to cope with it... You have a serious problem. It won't easily be solved.
- Cl: (looks doubtful)
- C : You are a responsible person, that is your strongest point. I can depend on you, not to take things lightly. That's why I'm proposing you to do this.

The counterparadox intervention was built up slowly. The consultant began by exploring the client's evaluation of the problem: a lot was done, but nothing helped. He then complimented the client on this honest appraisal and encouraged him to explore the problem's insolubility even further. Only when the client persevered in his despondency, did the consultant give him the task to stop thinking about solutions.

*Prescribing* sets the stage for a consulting process without forced ambitions. It relieves the consultant from having to prove effectiveness against his client's pessimistic expertness. Often the approach results in something unexpected. The client namely reports in the next session that his problem did not occur again, or at least occurred less often or was less severe. This change, as it appears, was due to circumstances which no one could foresee or influence.

The client also typically reports that he has noticed other things. He has discovered some conditions which led to the occurrence of his problem or he discovered other problems which he had to solve instead. In any case, *change* began as a 'spontaneous' process in which the client either started to get a new grip on his problem, or was confronted with developments which pushed this problem to the background. The consultant, at this moment, should refrain from applauding this development: '... in fact, this non-occurrence of your problem worsens our perspective of discovering solutions'. Of course, he offers his full willingness to discuss what happens in the mean time: a return to 'light-weight' paradox, showing *low key* interest and a not too expert stance...

## 8. Discussion

In this article, we contrasted a 'model' consulting process with the *vicious circle* that starts operating when the metacommunicative messages between client and consultant do not fit. We disregarded what the content of consulting was about, but - instead - concentrated on the interaction. Seen from that perspective, standstill is not inevitable: the consultant may stay on, but he should end his contribution to the circle. Of course, this is paradoxical: helping with non-helping interventions. Some side-remarks on this approach:

- this article does *not* maintain that it is better to forget all 'tried and true' consulting methods when dealing with resistance. It is true, that problems can sometimes be almost completely solved with consistent 'non-expert' and 'non-leading' consulting behavior. However, in most cases the counterparadox is only needed at certain points in process. The goal is always the avoidance of collision: letting the client know that one takes him seriously, even in troublesome moments. After such a moment, clients usually return to a more 'normal' consultation stance. One should accept this new development and there is no reason then to continue the counterparadoxical approach.
- we described four ways of introducing counterparadox in the consultation process. The interventions ranged from *light* to *heavy-weight* and, in general, their application should depend on the 'weight' of the client's paradox. A practical rule of thumb would be to start with light-weight interventions and only increase their weight if these show no effect upon the client's 'troublesome' denials. It is our experience, that in some 80 % of cases the first two - light weight - interventions are sufficient to keep away from struggles and solve the metacommunication problem between client and consultant.
- counterparadoxical behavior can be combined with every known consultancy approach, such as expert consultation, process consultation, 'management of change', etc. Every consulting approach, after all, has its own sort of *non-fitting* clients. But the ways in which the process goes astray are not very different. Therefore, the ways in which the process can be brought back on track need not be very different either. The examples in this article provide some illustration of this point.

*Final note.* Consultants are professionally occupied with the problems they have to solve. Therefore their 'natural reaction' to resistance is to concentrate on what they know and to intensify their communication about that with their client. Often this concentration on *content*, however, impedes a due reflection about *process*. Therefore this article presented a 'content-free' look at the dynamics of consulting. The ability to *forget about content* might well be the main challenge for consultants while applying the interventions we described.