



Publications

© 2018 Marisa (Maria L.) Guerin, PhD  
Retired President, Guerin  
Management Consulting Inc.

4621 Osage Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19143

215-990-6186 (M)

marisaguerin1@gmail.com  
https://www.guerinconsulting.com

Revised Version, May 2018

Based on

**“The Repair of the Container:  
Consulting Interventions  
in Support of Leadership”**

presented by M. Guerin at the  
2012 Annual Meeting of the  
International Society for the  
Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations,  
San Diego, California, June 9, 2012

Adapted for use with  
*Cranaleith Master Class for  
Experienced Consultants  
and Facilitators*

# THE REPAIR OF THE CONTAINER: *Honoring the Client-Consultant Relationship (and Resisting Seduction)*

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Introduction**.....p. 2

**The Importance of Boundaries**.....p. 3

**A Short Review of “Containment”**.....p. 6

**Sources of Disruption to Containment**.....p. 9

**Impact on Consultants**.....p.12

**Reparative Interventions**.....p.14

**Summary**.....p.18

**References**.....p.19

# I. INTRODUCTION

## Overview

*Whose work is it?*

*When does the consultant need to take the lead, and when does the client need to do so?*

*What's fair and helpful in that partnership?*

*What's necessary for the organization to progress?*

This paper explores some of these questions in the mutual relationship of consultants and clients. Productive collaboration occurs best if the leadership of the client organization is able to provide good-enough “containment” to its members, but sometimes that containment capacity is impaired, for a variety of reasons.

*Containment refers to the leader's role in fortifying the unconscious emotional coping ability of organization members when they face stress and anxiety in the pursuit of their mission.* It is an extremely important function of leadership, implicit but rarely defined in organizational documents such as position profiles or competency models. Without adequate containment, experiences of stress and pressure drive out the capacity for thought and creativity, replacing productive energy with regressive and defensive dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

*“Containment refers to the leader's role in fortifying the unconscious emotional coping ability of organization members.”*

The use of a consultant enhances the capacity of the existing leadership in order to provide a stronger or more focused space for the tackling of difficult issues. However, if an underlying reason for seeking consultation is a damaged or underdeveloped state of leadership containment, then the challenge for the consultant is much more sensitive. There are strong unconscious forces that can distort the client-consultant relationship, inviting collusion with the system and/or usurpation of the appropriate role of leadership.

This adaptation of a longer paper probes the implications of this dynamic for consultants. The “presenting problem” that initiates a contract for consulting assistance can vary widely – a need for team building, or fund-raising, or strategic planning, etc. Regardless of the technical or adaptive<sup>2</sup> issue that the client outlines as a focus for the consultation, the nature of the consulting role involves providing some degree of additional containment to the system as it grapples with a problem or an opportunity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Obholzer 1999

<sup>2</sup> Heifetz 1994

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES

In the ideal case, the consultant must carefully attend to the dynamics in play in order to both contribute expanded capability to the client system and support the integrity of the client authority system, without succumbing to the unconscious pull to replace the deficit in the containing function of leadership.

*“There are strong unconscious forces that can distort the client-consultant relationship, inviting collusion with the system or usurpation of the appropriate role of leadership.”*

But while business environments support the notion of leadership with its attendant responsibility and authority, many nonprofit and religious systems are less hierarchical, more communal, and may have ambiguous or time-limited authority structures. In these settings, the containing function of the consultant can overtake and replace the weaker containment potential of the client.

This can happen quite easily and results in the consultant occupying a sort of surrogate leader role, in contrast with the proper consulting role of bolstering the capabilities of the system and its leaders.

It is a subtle point, because of course, there are certainly valid aspects of a consulting engagement in which the consultant is actually supposed to be leading specific activities or deliberations in order to free the formal leaders for a different quality of participation. It is part of the professional responsibility of the consultant to be attentive to this role discipline, and when it may be unintentionally violated.

One way of addressing the problem of slipped boundaries involves naming the issue and re-setting the boundaries. This is a single-loop<sup>3</sup> corrective process that assumes that both client and consultant know what their role relationship should properly be. Calling out the issue and restoring the appropriate role relationship works only if both parties had the same boundary in mind at the outset.

By contrast, it is possible that the consultant may have been “*unconsciously recruited*” into a surrogate leader role because the members of the client system are not consciously aware of the gap in leadership containment and are defensively invested in this unawareness. In such cases, an explicit confrontation of the issue will yield little result.

If I wished to be successful as a consultant and to help my clients to be successful in their organizational missions, I had to develop some other more tangential approaches – alongside the main consultation process – for the second-level work of repairing or healing the client system’s own capacity for leadership containment.

I believe that this repair and healing happens frequently, but perhaps not explicitly, in the work of many consultants. Unfortunately, it is also the case that consultants sometimes miss the signal and unconsciously collude with the client system by overstepping the boundaries of their authority and taking up the work as if they were in fact an alternate system leader.

---

<sup>3</sup> Argyris and Schon 1978

It is an easy infraction to commit – either because of the seductive power in the unconscious operation of projective identification, or because of the consultant’s conscious desire to reduce the client’s anxiety by whatever means necessary, including letting the client move “the monkey” to the consultant’s back.

### Monitor language – it reflects assumptions

It is important to know how to register and react to distortion in the consultant-client relationship within a system. My internal alarm bells go off when I find myself speaking or acting as if I were the client, not the consultant. One simple and very revealing way to monitor the consultant’s internal boundary stance is to pay attention to whether the consultant is properly or improperly using the words “we” and “you” in conversations within client systems. For example:

**Improper:**

“Since **we** don’t have enough resources to tackle all of these program options, **we’ll** have to make some choices and set priorities for the organization.”

**Proper:**

“Since **your** resources are limited, I hope **we** can work together effectively so that **you** can make the choices that are necessary about which program options **you** should tackle first.”

It is unsettling to observe how many times consultants use “we” inappropriately when speaking of our client systems! I may be excessively rigorous in my monitoring of language in this way -- however, I am fairly certain that the mental model this kind of language reveals is one in which the consultant has “entered” the client system across a boundary that will create difficulty down the line. Why would this be problematic?

Two reasons come to mind – one related to integrity, and one related to effectiveness.

The **integrity** issue arises because, by using the language of “we,” the consultant emphasizes a communal or shared investment in the situation. This may be

*“The **paradox of consulting with integrity is that one gains greater, not lesser, trust when one is willing to risk the displeasure of the client in order to raise up a difficult issue.**”*

somewhat true at an affective or emotional level because of the caring relationships involved, but it is definitely **not** true when it comes to the ultimate stakes involved. The organization, especially if it is a membership body such as a religious community, will sink or swim on its own – but the consultant does **not** sink or swim with them. When the consultant speaks of “we” and holds the privilege of advising or influencing the organization, this places the listeners in an artificial relationship that confuses the actual authority and responsibility that they hold. A client-consultant relationship with integrity operates on the basis of mutuality and collaboration in which each party remembers its own scope of responsibility.

The **effectiveness** issue arises because sooner or later, a consultant who has unconsciously “joined” the client organization will lose the objectivity and perceived neutrality that is essential to their continued value. It goes without saying that the client needs to know that the consultant is caring, committed, and

willing to be a partner in challenging work – but if the consultant were to become like another member of the system, something important will have been lost, especially when it comes to being able to speak truth to power.

Maintaining the respectful stance of a partner, not an insider, makes possible the paradox of consulting with integrity: namely, one gains greater, not lesser, trust when one is willing to risk the displeasure of the client in order to raise up a difficult issue.

The art of consulting involves maintaining this complex relationship in a careful and disciplined way: respecting the boundary, and at the same time connecting to the client with great care for them and the problems for which they are seeking help.

### III. A SHORT REVIEW OF “CONTAINMENT”

Important and worthy work, while rewarding, is usually difficult work. If the mission of an institution is challenging, then it carries with it not only the hope of success but also an inherent potential for stress, anxiety, conflict or failure. This combination of risk and value is intrinsic to the notion of primary task<sup>4</sup>, the core work that must be accomplished for the survival and success of the enterprise.

All institutions with a meaningful task to perform experience this reality, no matter whether they are business enterprises, public sector or government bodies, nonprofits (NGOs), or faith-based organizations.

The unconscious anxiety that accompanies risk stimulates regression in organization members and can be disabling unless modulated by way of helpful organizational structure and design, appropriate authority roles and leadership behaviors, prudent allocation of resources, and work processes that protect the capacity of organizational members to think and act<sup>5</sup>.

This modulation of anxiety on behalf of productivity is the function of containment, the organizational analogue to the containing function of the therapist in counseling<sup>6</sup>.

#### The Functionality of Containment

Good-enough holding and containment of work-related anxiety can be provided in a number of ways. The focus, reliability, authority and steadiness of the leader in the face of evident challenges provide containment. Reliable role boundaries and management structures for taking on the risks of work are other ways of holding, channeling, and containing anxiety.

It is useful to note that leaders can draw on both positive and negative capabilities to be effective in their roles as containers of organizational distress. Positive capabilities, in this regard, are the skills, knowledge, and ability to take action that the leader possesses by virtue of native talent, education, and experience. These are the qualities generally named in leadership profiles and competency models.

“Negative capability” is a less familiar term in normal discourse. It is the term for the leader’s ability to “*not-do-something*”, but to tolerate, with attention and patience, the uncertainties and ambiguities that come with risky and challenging work. The leader with sufficient negative capability is able to withstand the strong unconscious compulsion to disperse anxiety into immediate action, intellectualizing, or emotion<sup>7</sup>. Tolerating the difficult feelings aroused by risk or conflict contributes to containment by allowing space and time in which to think, to be in touch with what is emerging, and to choose a path forward with some degree of inner freedom.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rice 1963

<sup>5</sup> Hirschhorn 1993

<sup>6</sup> Hinshelwood 1991

<sup>7</sup> French 2000

*“Negative capability” is the term for the leader’s ability to **not-do-something** --- to tolerate, with attention and patience, the uncertainties and ambiguities that come with risky and challenging work.”*

In an ideal world, a condition of “good enough” containment permits organization members to be sufficiently in touch with reality to recognize and analyze facts, and also sufficiently secure to create plans or take actions that address real issues and move the mission forward.

Religious organizations often draw upon the language of spiritual maturity to convey similar concepts. When they speak of the need for quiet reflection or discernment or use words that have to do with pondering or meditation or prayer, they are addressing the value of an inner-space that enables the leader and therefore the group to remain attentive to anxiety-provoking topics that might otherwise

evoke flight or panicked action. This “negative capability” flowing from spiritual maturity is one example of the type of unique resource that a religious organization has available to it. This trust in a power beyond the leader’s own ego can potentially provide an extra measure of containment that enables religious work groups in stressful situations to avoid feeling paralyzed by the risks they feel.

### **Symptoms of Impaired Containment**

In the absence of the adequate containment of anxiety by way of good-enough organizational structures, procedures, and actions of leadership, distressing emotions can be paralyzing or can lead work groups to act out in ways that are not thought-through or productive.

In organizations, inadequate or ruptured containment of anxiety leads unconsciously to numerous coping strategies that in effect are dysfunctions, for example:

- Denial of the urgency of problems;
- Blaming other units or scapegoating individuals;
- Paralysis with respect to necessary initiative;
- Failure to address evident incompetence;
- Endless studies of possible solutions;
- **Overdependence on consultants**, etc.

These behaviors may be symptoms of unconscious social defenses against the intolerable anxiety of the risky situation<sup>8</sup>.

Because such reactions are **unconscious**, they are **not** susceptible to training or education or other rational remedies. To provide adequate containment, the emotional need must be addressed.

Sometimes the restoration of adequate containment is as straightforward as the leader’s candid and truthful assessment of the real problem and a credible, responsible plan for attempting to tackle it. This works even if it is clear to

---

<sup>8</sup> Hirschhorn 1998

everyone, including the leader, that the challenge is big and the outcome uncertain.

Responsible leadership communication is effective in providing containment because it engages the leader and the followers with reality in a constructive way. It is neither cheerleading nor despair – but a reasonable, in-touch reflection of the current mess, along with a confidence that it will be survived.

Unfortunately, it is not surprising that leaders who are already relying on consultation support to address challenging issues may be precisely **unable** to provide the necessary psychological containment to their organization. Part of the contribution of the consultant, in an unspoken aspect of his or her contract, is to amplify or enhance the containment available to the leader and the organization so they can meaningfully engage with the presenting problems.



## IV. SOURCES OF DISRUPTION TO CONTAINMENT

Leadership containment ability is disrupted when leaders lack some necessary degree of authorization for their role, for reasons that may derive from above, below, or within, as explored below. Other sources of vulnerability in the containment capacity of leadership can arise from situational or temporal factors such as a merger, acquisition, or leadership succession, or from the ethical or moral compromise of the leadership role.

Besides the adequacy of leadership authorization, there is another important source of containment that may be inadequate when an organization needs to address difficult issues. This second arena is the appropriate use of processes or operating principles so that the risks and anxieties inherent in the work can be modulated by structures that protect individuals from becoming overwhelmed or dysfunctional.

Both of these sources of impairment in containment can be alleviated with appropriate consultation support.

### Impairments to Leadership Containment

#### *Structural Weakness from “Above”*

Weak containment may be inherent in the very structures of authority and leadership because the formal, institutional delegation of authority is resisted, constrained or unclear. For example, some organizations create ambiguous titles for leadership positions without appreciating the constraint that can result when the organization is in crisis. As well, many social sector organizations operate from a culture that values high participation and egalitarian membership. Sometimes this leads to an aversion to differentiating responsibilities and acknowledging the discretion (authority) that might be needed at various times so that those tasked with leadership have the necessary authority to serve the organization faithfully.

#### *Sanctioning Withheld or Controlled from “Below”*

Even if leadership authority is formally and structurally clear, the containment available from the leadership function may nevertheless be impaired by fluctuations or gaps in the degree of authorization freely given to the leaders by the members, consciously or unconsciously. This is a regular challenge for those who operate within **elected** leadership organizations, because the strength of the followership bond oscillates in predictable ways as elections approach and during “lame duck” periods.

In other organizations, a leader may not be perceived to be morally or politically legitimate to those over whom she or he has institutional formal authority. If those persons consequently withhold their *personal, discretionary* followership of the leader, this lack of authorization weakens the capacity of the leader role to provide containment and guidance for the whole.

### ***Incomplete Enactment of the Leader Role from “Within”***

Some sources of impairment for leadership containment occur within the psyche of the person of the leader. These distortions of containment arise from problems in the ways the leader personally enacts his or her leadership role.

“There are two ways to enact a role. We can take it by facing the real work it represents, or we can violate it by escaping the risks such work poses....”  
(Hirschhorn, 1988)

Persons in leadership may consciously or unconsciously fail to “fully occupy” the role they have taken on. It is important to emphasize that authorization from “within” does NOT mean that leaders have to be perfect, all-competent, or even to pretend to be so in order to provide containment to others. In fact, courage is more important than competence when it comes to stepping into one’s given leadership role.

***“Courage is more important than competence when it comes to stepping into one’s given leadership role.”***

The internal acceptance of the leader’s proper authority and role is a radical form of humility and courage. The willingness to speak up, to take action, to affirm others and to name difficult issues are all ways that leaders convey to followers that they are on duty, responsible for their watch, and attentive to the needs and limits of the people they lead.

### **Impairments to Containment via Structures and Processes**

In most larger corporate environments, processes and structures that help to contain anxiety have evolved over time and are normal for daily work. For example, if a decision that entails risk has to be made (starting or stopping a business line, buying or divesting of property, establishing a new policy affecting employees, etc.) it is not uncommon for a committee or task group to have the role of analyzing options and recommending actions to executives who are then responsible for making the decision. This arrangement ensures a structural allocation of responsibility that gives each party – employees on the committee, management making the decision – some support for the part that they will play, and some protection from the anxiety of proceeding with actions that may involve serious risk.

Other examples of containing dynamics can be found in the use of stage-gate processes, member consultation methods, timely use of research or expertise, well-managed meetings and projects, use of known protocols for assessments, etc.

Organizations undergoing leadership change, significant restructuring, or organizations that are highly informal and communal in their operating style may lack broadly-agreed processes for handling tough issues. The pressure points on individuals may be excessive, eventually leading to the dysfunctions that show up when people are denying problems, fleeing their responsibilities, scapegoating someone, or otherwise defending themselves from the intolerable stresses they are facing.

## **Implications for Leadership and Consulting**

When there is “good enough” containment provided by the leadership of an institution and the structures and processes for managing the work, then the members of the organization are enabled to think, plan, and act effectively. They can engage with risky or difficult work and push complicated issues through to some satisfactory resolution. This is especially true for work that is adaptive rather than technical – requiring human creativity, discretion, judgment, or courage<sup>9</sup>.

Impaired leadership containment ability is not likely to be, by itself, the single or only cause of organizational dysfunction, but it can significantly exacerbate existing problems. This situation, in turn, has an important effect on the experience that the consultant will have in working with the client organization, and on the interventions that the consultant may have to use in order to support the client system without usurping the leadership role itself.

---

<sup>9</sup> Heifetz 1994

## V. IMPACT ON CONSULTANTS

The impact on a consultant or facilitator working with an organization with impaired leadership or structural containment involves two levels: the consultant's inner emotional attention, and the consultant's options for intervention.

*“Feelings of ‘heavy lifting’ or feelings of ‘indispensability’ are clues that the client system is projecting its leadership issues into the consultant relationship.”*

Prior research by Krantz and Gilmore and other contributors to the literature on organization dynamics has examined the parallel processes that can occur within consulting teams that reflect the dynamics in the client system<sup>10</sup>, and many consultants recognize the importance of “use of the self” in diagnostic and intervention activities.

The first level of impact on the consultant is emotional – the consultant can become aware of the distortions in the client system's leadership containment or emotional fields by attending to the feelings engendered in him or her.

Two kinds of feelings within the consultant can give evidence for the condition of impaired leadership containment as a result of weakly-held authority or structure. One feeling state is a constellation of **impotence/burden/guilt**; the other feeling state is a constellation of **omnipotence/inflation/mastery**<sup>11</sup>.

By contrast, when the leadership containment is functioning well enough, consultant feelings can range from the genuine anxiety of a daunting challenge to the genuine satisfaction of a successful project – both ends of this continuum are realistic and proportional, anchored in a partnership with a client who psychologically “owns” both the problem and the solution.

### The Signal in the Feeling of “Heavy Lifting”

When the consultant's feelings of impotence, burden, guilt, obligation, and worry are out of proportion to the normal levels of anxiety that anyone might face when they do challenging work, then such feelings may be a clue that the sense of responsibility and perhaps the feelings of despair and distress that the leadership is unable to contain have been projected into and are taking life within the consultant.

The sense of “heavy lifting” is almost always a signal that the consultant must take some action to correct the imbalance in the distribution of responsibility for the organizational issues involved in the consulting engagement.

The delicacy of the situation however, is that at such moments the client is precisely **incapable** of or defended against the prospect of addressing the imbalance. It is genuinely and actually beyond the client's capacity at the moment. The solution cannot be reached through a rational problem-solving discussion or by retreating across a boundary – this kind of action may well be experienced emotionally by the client as abandonment or betrayal.

---

<sup>10</sup> Krantz and Gilmore 1991

<sup>11</sup> LaPierre 1993

Instead, the consultant who wishes to support and repair the client's capacity for containment must draw on indirect methods in tandem with the more visible, technical, work of the consultation. Some examples are included in the section below titled "Reparative Interventions."

### **The Signal in the Feeling of Indispensability**

In a different way, feelings of omnipotence, superiority, excellence, and indispensability that may attend the experience of consulting are a signal as well that the client system may be managing its leadership issues through unconscious projection.

In such a case, the inadequacy of the leadership function – either through insufficient structures of authority or through personal abdication of the leaders or both – has been unconsciously addressed by the client organization by projecting into the consultant the **valued** functions of the leader – protector, wisdom figure, competent player, etc.

In much the same way that "heavy lifting" signals a need for action, so does the sense of being *exceptionally* important and valuable to the client. This is a very seductive experience; it is quite difficult to remain objective here, since most persons desire to be affirmed and valued. One way to distinguish the difference between appropriate affirmation and excessive adulation is the sense of client dependency or idealization of the consultant that comes with heroic projection.

Just as the consultant needs not to take it personally if they become the target of displaced criticism or anger, the consultant must equally be prepared not to take it personally if they become the repository of out-of-proportion appreciation.

Regular reflection, maintaining a consulting journal, or partnership with a colleague are all ways of enhancing the consultant's sensitivity to these emotional signals. There is constant inner work required so that a consultant can maintain awareness and remain helpfully engaged with the client in the face of powerful emotional currents.

In addition to this personal centering the consultant must cultivate, the discussion following suggests some discreet "containment-repair" interventions that the consultant can consider that could enable members and leaders of the client system to take up their own share of the burden and the joy.

## VI. REPARATIVE INTERVENTIONS

The “repair of the container” is the way I found myself thinking about the additional, supplementary dimensions of the consulting work for client engagements facing leadership issues. I describe these aspects of the consulting engagements as “additions” because they are actions that may not be necessary in client relationships that are characterized by a good-enough degree of leadership containment.

*“Reparative interventions represent discipline in providing reinforcement for the client’s own role enactment and careful avoidance of the temptation to step into the unoccupied leadership space.”*

On the face of it, these consultant interventions don’t represent anything unusual in the way of methodology. More than anything, they represent discipline in providing reinforcement for the client’s own role enactment and careful avoidance of the temptation to step into the unoccupied leadership space.

The following types of interventions can be used to strengthen the containment capacity of the client system in a condition of under-developed leadership authority and structures.

### *1. A Relationship of Support and Coaching*

Obviously, the primary intervention in such situations comes from the relationship of trust and support that the consultant and client develop. Through the containment provided by the consultant, the client takes in a fuller understanding of the wider situation and his or her own potential as an actor in the system.

In whatever way it might be accomplished, the pivotal and most enduring effect of such intervention is the leader consciously taking on the responsibility and accountability for the leader role and grounding himself or herself in a realistic set of expectations.

An over-controlling leader who suppresses dialogue can become a more reliable container by learning ways to encourage open exchange, debate, and collaborative thinking.

A passive leader who is failing to fully step into the risks and responsibilities of the leader role may become a more reliable container by clearly giving voice to thoughts, concerns, decisions, and commitments.

## 2. Giving Visibility and Interpretation to the Missing Roles or Functions

Most clients don't see what isn't there! ...meaning, they work with what the organization is or has been, but don't necessarily realize what is missing from the system. The expertise of the consultant in organization and management effectiveness is a resource to the client in such cases.

In the case of limited capacity for leadership containment, one possible cause is an under-differentiated role or organization. As an example, if small or ambiguously-authorized groups are simultaneously responsible for analyzing an organizational problem and for implementing the solution, including its aggressive or risky elements, neither of the two responsibilities is likely to be done optimally<sup>12</sup>.

A more precise recommendation might be to suggest that the client form two groups -- a steering committee for an initiative that contains the decision makers, in combination with a project team or committee that contains important subject matter experts or invested stakeholders.

A different sort of situation occurs when the organizational point of engagement for the consultation is not happening at the correct level, the level at which the underlying problem actually exists.

In one such situation, I was asked to consult to a non-profit organization on issues related to its mission and funding; in the first meeting with the organization director, it was clear that weakly-held authorization, direction, and commitment *at the Board level* were impeding the best efforts of the organizational management to proceed. I recommended that I provide a diagnostic step that would include interviews with a sample from the management and from the Board levels, with a feedback report that would go to both.

This action was intended to provide visibility of the issues and options to the larger system, and to provide a neutral and external source of feedback and education to both groups. Without such boundary-linking, the conscientious work of the management group was destined to have the same effect as spinning the wheels on a stuck car.

In a different client engagement, a joint examination of the repeated problems the organization was having led me to point out to the client that, precisely at the point at which coordination was needed in the work, there was no person, role, or group with that responsibility. Issues festered as they fell between the cracks, not for anyone's lack of commitment, but for lack of a formal agreement as to the who, when, and where of ensuring coordination. The repair to this gap righted the ship quickly.

---

<sup>12</sup> Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992

### 3. Designing Events and Meetings to Amplify the “Voice” of Appropriate Authority

Consultants are often engaged to help an organization with a type of event that the client has already decided it needs, for some reason – a leadership meeting, Board retreat, community planning, etc.

The tendency of clients to seek a consultant or facilitator after they have set a good many parameters for the event is very common; however, much more than half of the total value of a meeting facilitator is delivered before the meeting even begins, in the work of designing and shaping the event. The assumptions that are

limiting the organization’s effectiveness will similarly limit the event’s value unless the consultant, with the client, can use the occasion of planning a meeting to gently (or not) examine how the forum and its agenda provide support for the primary task or contribute to the limitation.

Starting from questions such as, “Who should be attending the meeting, and why?” the consultant and client can design an effective event that does the necessary work of the group, with suitable attention to the boundaries of task, time, resources, and leadership that will best support it.

Within the design of the event, interventions that help to strengthen the containing function of the leadership are fairly straightforward – for example, being very disciplined about the client occupying the chairing (executive) functions

such as opening and closing the meeting, speaking to purpose at the beginning and speaking to “What next” at the end; also, ensuring that ideas or proposals surfacing during a meeting are correctly connected to the appropriate committee, leader, or client-system department.

Even non-verbals such as seating arrangements and visual contact are important and primal signals of the location of authority. Especially important for the function of containment would be the things that the leader says to the body --- expressions of the issues and the ways they are being borne.

The consultant intending to reinforce leadership containment can make use of many subtle ways to support the voice of those in authority in the design and facilitation of such events – although the flip side is that there are also abundant opportunities to overstep the client consultant boundary and take inappropriate control of the event.

A further danger to remain alert about is the fact that organizations often invest specific facilitation techniques with almost-magical properties. The *idealization* of technique – be it Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Myers-Briggs, World Café, or any number of worthwhile methodologies – is a signal of regressive dynamics. When use of a given process is in danger of being idealized, I recommend the use of “plain vanilla” techniques that have a low glamour quotient but are aptly suited to the nature of the work the client system needs to be doing. This is one element of the demythologizing of the consultant as an object of fantasy and projected hope.

*“When process is being idealized, I recommend the use of ‘plain vanilla’ techniques that have a low glamour quotient but are aptly suited to the nature of the work the client system needs to be doing.”*



#### ***4. Drafting Documents or Working Notes that Hold the Difficult-To-Integrate Parts of the Client's Situation***

It continues to be true that there is power in the pen. It has been my experience that well-chosen written interventions provided to the client can be very helpful containers – in the first place for reinforcing verbal understandings, and in the second place for providing continuity of deliberations across time and perhaps leadership changes.

*“It continues to be true that there is power in the pen: well-chosen written interventions provided to the client can be very helpful containers.”*

The consulting note or working note is one such written intervention that is provided by the consultant to the client either as a reflection on an experience or as a preparation for work together. The format of the note permits the consultant to give voice to observations that might educate the client or focus the client's attention on issues that are affecting the work.

In addition to the (sparing!) use of consulting notes, I have also found that client systems with distributed leadership can be helped to find their unified voice if the consultant recommends or assists with the preparation of an evergreen document that contains the storyline of the work, be it strategic planning or organization change. PowerPoint slides work well for such a document if a storyboard format is used. The storyline can be updated, amplified, and edited at subsequent meetings so that the group maintains a sense of its own narrative and trajectory.

#### ***5. Facilitating the Disciplined Work of Responsibility Charting***

There are many practical tools, instruments, and methodologies that are available to the organizational consultant and which may build up the capacities of the client system. Among these resources, one that is particularly helpful to client systems with under-developed or confused authority structures is Responsibility Charting as applied to key roles in an enterprise. In Responsibility Charting, a set of important decision areas is listed, and each of the involved roles is assigned a level of responsibility designated by a letter code. Most often the codes represent the following: A = Approval or veto authority; R = Responsible for managing the initiative; C = Must be consulted before decisions are made; I = Must be informed when decisions are made. Sometimes groups add S = Supports the work of the initiative.

By comparing, negotiating, and agreeing on the nature of each role's responsibility, the client system develops a concrete blueprint to the nature of the authority relations in the organization.

To be effective, such agreements must be used, monitored, and regularly updated, and must be considered a record of the authority relations, not the “god” of the authority relations. Otherwise, the exercise may be a defensive ritual that protects members from the actual risk of acting on their differentiated authority.

## VII. SUMMARY

The nature of challenging work in business and in the non-profit sector presents organization members and their leaders with many types of risks that can engender anxiety and regression to less capable modes of functioning. One contribution of the leadership function to the accomplishment of the organization's primary task is the containment of anxiety – a demonstrated ability to hold steady in the face of ambiguity, conflict, or risk and to make space for thinking and for organized and realistic action.

The containing function of leadership is a result of many factors: formal systems of authorization, roles, boundaries, and administrative structures; sanctioning of the leadership persons and roles by the members of the organization; internal enactment of the role of leadership with the right combination of positive and negative capability; and all of the aforementioned at levels sufficient for the realistic challenges face by the enterprise.

Certain types of organizations that are vulnerable to impairment in the containing function, for example, religious organizations with elected leadership structures or family businesses in subsequent generations. Many such organizations are precisely those most likely to seek consulting or facilitation support to address organizational problems.

If impaired containment is complicating the business or organizational challenges, the unconscious mechanism of projective identification can mobilize the consultant in ways that are collusive or unhelpful. However, if used as data for analysis and reflection, the feelings generated in the consultant can illuminate the nature of the compromised leadership functionality.

The options for the consultant in such a situation are complicated. The primary task of the consultation is most likely a business or management issue *other than* the underlying compromised containment function. But there will be no enduring benefit to the client if the work progresses by means of the “recruited capability” of the consultant, without some degree of repair or healing of the client system capacity for its own development.

Consulting interventions that promote repair of the client's leadership containment capability can include:

- A relationship of support and coaching
- Giving voice and interpretation to the missing roles or functions
- Designing events and meetings to amplify the “voice” of appropriate authority
- Drafting documents and working notes that hold the difficult-to-integrate parts of the client's situation
- Facilitating the disciplined work of responsibility charting

And perhaps most invisible and most leveraged of all:  
**NOT** doing what isn't yours to do.

## VIII. REFERENCES

- Argyris, C., and Schön, D. (1978) *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley
- French, Robert. (2000) Negative capability, dispersal and the containment of emotion. Paper presented at the 2000 Symposium of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations.
- Heifetz, R.A. (1994) *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Belknap Press.
- Hinshelwood, R.D. Second Edition (1991). *A dictionary of Kleinian thought*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hirschhorn, L. (1988). *The workplace within: Psychodynamics of organizational life*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hirschhorn, L., Barnett, C.K. (1993) *The psychodynamics of organizations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hirschhorn, L., Gilmore, T. N. (1992) "The new boundaries of the boundaryless company" in *Harvard Business Review*, May 1992. Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School.
- Krantz, J and Gilmore, T.N. (1991) "Understanding the dynamics between consulting teams and clients", in Kets de Vries, M.F.R. (Ed) *Organizations on the Couch*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Lapierre, L. (1993). "Mourning, potency and power in management" in Hirschhorn, L., Barnett, C.K. (Eds.) *The psychodynamics of organizations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Obholzer, A. (1999). "Managing the unconscious at work" in R. French and R. Vince (Eds.) *Group Relations, Management, and Organization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rice, A.K. (1963) *The enterprise and its environment*. London: Tavistock Publications.