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Wanted: a scapegoat **Annette Clancy**

Annette Clancy explains why hiring the wrong consultant can sometimes be the right idea for change-averse firms.

Have you ever wondered why hiring the wrong consultant might often be the right idea? It sounds like a contradiction, yet it underlines how organisations may begin to recognise what individual members suspect, albeit without any proof other than gut intuition. How do you manage the mounting pressure to deliver when all around you, the signs are telling you that failure is on the horizon? Sometimes, the catalyst is in hiring a consultant – one who is destined to become the “wrong” consultant.

Working together, an organisation’s representatives and its consultants may reach a point where it becomes clear that the original consultation task simply isn’t the task that needs to be done. Change processes evoke anxiety: we don’t like them, they are disruptive and uncomfortable. Anxiety differs from fear because we just don’t know what we are anxious about; when we are afraid, we do. It is difficult to talk about or deal with at a conscious level, but its presence is felt everywhere in what may look like irrational behaviour and illogical processes.

In the 1950s, Elizabeth Menzies Lyth conducted a study of night nurses. Her consultative goal was to establish why so many of them were leaving the NHS. She found that nurses, through the very nature of their work in close proximity to illness and death, insulated themselves from the deep anxieties of their work through what she termed “social defences”. These defences allowed nurses to carry on their daily work by protecting them from overwhelming emotion and at the same time, provided them with

other difficulties: nurses distanced themselves by referring not to suffering people but to the medical conditions which their patients suffered, “the cardiac case in bed 10”. Over time, this defensive necessity caused them to feel deskilled and unwanted as carers, and this motivated them to pursue other, more fulfilling work.

In all of these scenarios, the consultant will absorb the organisation’s anxiety by feeling unwelcome, not good enough, set up to fail, disappointed, confused and angry. In many cases, the consultant will be scapegoated by the organisation for failing to deliver while not knowing that they were hand-picked to fail.

“” When the wrong consultant is picked, it may be the right decision for an organisation that isn’t ready to deal with change. A ritual sacrifice is often required and on many occasions, the consultant is that offering.

In choosing a consultant who will fail to manage the change process, it may go unnoticed – as in the case of the nurses’ social defenses – that the organisation has other, less conscious goals. Choosing a consultant who doesn’t, or can’t, deliver may protect us from the anxiety arising from our fear of change. Instead, we blame the consultant for not being good enough.

The consultant’s uphill battle

Consultants can be “not good enough” in many ways. They may not have the right people skills to work with the emotional issues that change presents. The project will be micro-managed, take enormous amounts of time and may be discontinued due to excessive costs. The consultant may not have the authority to roll out the agreed changes or she/he may be de-authorised by the board from actually delivering on the task.

A ritual sacrifice

When the wrong consultant is picked, it may be the right decision for an organisation that isn’t ready to deal with change. A ritual sacrifice is often required and on many occasions, the consultant is that offering. In this instance, failure isn’t failure; it’s a strong signal that there is other work to be accomplished before change is actioned. Very often, that other work is finding a safe way to address the underlying anxiety that all change evokes.

If a company is brave enough, it may look to its “failures” as rich learning about the need to connect with the very real and very human fear of change.



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