Shaping the conversation: How management consultants actively engage knowledge boundary processes to provide value in consulting engagements

Author: Anne Messervy, PhD Candidate: Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia. Email: anne_messervy@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to an understanding of what *actually* takes place during consulting engagements. It draws on data collected from a qualitative case study of eight engagements by a niche consultancy in Australia to describe how consultants actively engage boundary crossing processes to address knowledge boundaries encountered during formal interactions with clients. While consultants actively managed knowledge boundary processes during interactions, by applying techniques such as evoking an 'ideal state' for clients, the engagements also yielded many missed opportunities for knowledge transformation.

Keywords: knowledge boundaries, boundary process, consulting process, consultant-client interaction

INTRODUCTION

One of the areas of management consulting research that remains in need of further illumination is the actual consulting engagement, and in particular the interaction between management consultants and clients. The quality of this consultant-client interaction is one of the key determinants of a successful consulting outcome (Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner, 2009; Schon, 1983).

While recent research has focused on the client's role in the consulting engagement (see for instance the 2009 special issue about the client in consulting in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*), the actual consultant-client interaction aspect of the consulting engagement requires further investigation. In particular, the knowledge shaping practices that take place between consultants and clients have not been studied in great detail (Sturdy, Werr & Buono, 2009c.

In alignment with the conceptualization of consulting as knowledge work, several studies have applied 'knowledge flows' as a lens to study consultant-client interactions. By incorporating concepts from boundary theory, these studies have aimed to describe the knowledge shaping that occurs during a consulting engagement. A prominent example is a study by Sturdy and colleagues (Sturdy, Handley, Clark & Fincham, 2009a; see also Handley, Clark, Fincham & Sturdy, 2007) of three consulting engagements in the United Kingdom. The study drew on the *3T* knowledge movement framework developed by Carlile (2002, 2004) and utilised longitudinal observation and interview research as well as a survey of consultants and clients working together, to study the knowledge transfer processes during a consulting engagement. The findings by Sturdy et al. (2009a) suggest that the conventional view of consultants as disseminators of new management ideas misrepresents their role in project work. Dissemination appears to occur by default rather than design and learning is often concerned with project management or communication processes more than the actual knowledge domain of the particular project.

This paper aims to build on studies of knowledge shaping in consulting engagements by describing the findings of a study that applied the 3T framework to eight consulting engagements in Australia. This study was undertaken as one of three case studies for a doctoral dissertation and focused on a niche consultancy advising SME (small & medium enterprises) clients in the manufacturing industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Management consultants as knowledge brokers to clients

Management consultants are regarded as key knowledge disseminators to managers and organizations (Sturdy et al., 2009a), along with gurus, the mainstream media and business schools (Abrahamson, 1996). Consulting companies have also styled themselves as Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIFs) (Alvesson, 1993), and developed their claims to expert

knowledge into a specific product offering and a means to generate economic value (Pellegrin-Boucher, 2006). The dissemination of this knowledge has also been incorporated by the mainstream consultancies into their sales proposition.

However, the nature and value of consulting knowledge has been the topic of much discussion (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Berglund & Werr, 2000; Clark & Salaman; 1998; Clark, 1995). Recent studies (Sturdy et al., 2007; 2009a) focusing on consultant-client interaction show that at best consultants provide clients with sector knowledge, and that client learning from consulting engagements (if any) happens more by chance than design. There is also agreement that attempts to analyze consulting knowledge is complicated by the fact that the knowledge is entangled with its delivery (Collins, 2006).

The roles of *expert* and *knowledge broker* are the most widely described consultant roles (Sturdy et al, 2009b; Buono, 2002). As experts, consultants are regarded as the holders of specialist knowledge which they can apply to help clients solve a problem (Curnow & Reuvid, 2003). Consultants act as bridges (Wenger, 2003) or knowledge arbiters (Sturdy et al., 2009b) moving knowledge across organizational boundaries. The role of knowledge broker entails providing knowledge at competitive costs and acting as cross-industry agents of knowledge transfer (Wenger, 2003; Anand, Glick & Manz, 2002). Czarniawska (2001) describes the work of consultants as *merchants* of meaning, while Alvesson (2004, p.84) prefers the term *brokers* of meaning, to imply interaction (a broker wants to engage clients in labelling work and meaning production.) Sturdy et al. (2009a) refer to consultants as *conduits* through which knowledge from a variety of sources is appropriated, transformed and sometimes transferred.

The bulk of academic literature on consultants as knowledge disseminators to organizations has, as underlying assumption, that of knowledge as concrete and static (Hicks, Nair &

Wilderom, 2009; Nikolova et al., 2009). It is only more recent, and very limited, research that has focused on knowledge as a social construct and consultants as *meaning brokers* or knowledge interpreters. For instance, the study by Sturdy et al. (2009b) takes a practice-based or situated learning perspective and acknowledges that both consultants and clients bring knowledge to the interaction, and potentially learn from the consulting engagement. They conclude that the conventional view of management consultants as key disseminators of management knowledge is exaggerated and misrepresents their role in project work.

Bringing the client into view

A focus on the *client* of consulting services is a recent development. Earlier studies took an often simplistic view of clients, describing them simply as anyone who needs help (Schein, 1999), as a single/rational interest, or as helpless or even gullible victims of sophisticated persuasive practices (Sturdy et al., 2009c). In a special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* focusing on the client in consulting, Sturdy, Werr & Buono (2009c) point out that the client perspective was most likely neglected given that research mainly relied on interviews with consultants in large consultancies. They reiterated a requirement for studying consulting engagements by observing consultant-client interaction.

However, recent research has definitely brought the client into greater focus (Höner & Mohe, 2009). As clients are becoming more experienced and savvy in their use of consultants – with many clients having been former consultants – this difference is diminishing even further. Sturdy et al. (2009c) argue that there is more than one client within a client organization, for instance the commissioning client may differ from the client personnel working alongside the consultants. The often simplistic view of the client as a single, rational entity should therefore make way for approaches that acknowledge a complex client system,

which refers to a heterogenous mix of interests (Alvesson, Karreman, Sturdy & Handley, 2009).

Nikolova et al. (2009) provide a detailed overview of the literature related to consultant-client interaction, and identify three main perspectives, namely Expert, Critical (Performance), and Social Learning. The perspectives differ in terms of their approach to consultant-client interaction and the nature of consulting knowledge, as detailed in the following table:

Perspective and focus	Consultant role and consulting knowledge	Consultant-client interaction process
Expert Focuses on ways to improve the consulting process (eg. Argyris (1971; 1991) and Schein (1969; 1999), with the work of consultants characterized as '…consisting of the encouragement of management learning, and the avoidance of defensiveness and denial' (Clark & Fincham, 2002, p5).	*Consultant as expert* holds a privileged interpretive position with abstract consulting knowledge being regarded as superior to the specific, context-dependent knowledge of clients.	*The helpless client.* While consultants take an active role in this interaction – analysing problems and formulating solutions – the role of the client is reduced to being an information supplier during problem diagnosis, without being actively involved in the creative part of the actual problem-solving process.
Critical / Performance The focus is on how management consultants demonstrate value to clients, with an emphasis on issues around legitimization and the persuasive strategies (Fincham, 1999). This perspective also addresses ways to assess the value of the consulting service (Buono, 2002).	*Consultants as performers* draw on persuasive strategies to convince clients. Knowledge is a specific language, representing ways of talking about management, managers and organizations (Clark & Salaman, 1998).	*Clients as beneficiaries of impression management techniques* (Clark & Salaman, 1998). Incorporates interaction by stressing the importance of talk and rhetoric in the engagement.

Perspective and focus	Consultant role and consulting knowledge	Consultant-client interaction process
Social Learning Emphasizes the roles of clients as active participants in the diagnosis and problem solving process. Incorporates ideas from socio-cultural perspectives to organizational change, such as Lave & Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory.	*Consultants and clients as knowledge co-constructors.* There is no knowledge *out there* to be brought into the client system. Clients possess valuable knowledge which needs to be incorporated into the solution and establishing common interpretations for knowledge is a key theme.	A process of dialogue where clients and consultants share authority and control over the negotiation of meaning. However, it also acknowledges that clients and consultants speak different languages and need to make their interpretations clear to each other to overcome differences in interpretation. In other words, they are separated by boundaries.

Table 1: Three perspectives to consultant-client interaction (adapted from Nikolova et al., 2009)

In undertaking consulting engagements, Van Nistelrooij, de Caluwe & Schouten (2007) point to a potential dilemma: while consultants claim to see change as processes of self-organization and learning, the intervention methods they apply clearly specify the results in advance and make it easy to plan, control and monitor the change process closely. So, for instance, consultants may state that they focus on change and learning; but choose methodologies that do not support this approach. This is also enforced by what is regarded as project success or how project performance is assessed, namely the project and process quality (Luo & Liberatore, 2009). Process quality refers to the quality of client-consultant interactions, governance, and learning; while product quality refers to the quality of implemented (technology) applications and satisfaction of business users.

Adopting a boundary crossing perspective to knowledge shaping in consulting engagements

Carlile (2002; 2004) situates the knowledge shaping problem within boundary theory. He draws on Leonard-Barton's (1995) perspective that 'innovation occurs at the boundaries between specialised domains' to examine the management of knowledge across boundaries

in contexts where innovation is required. Carlile is particularly interested in the existence of knowledge boundaries which can hamper an organization's new product development efforts.

Similar to the positivist approach to knowledge transfer, Carlile draws on Shannon & Weaver's (1949) mathematical theory of communication and describes three progressively complex boundaries (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic) and three progressively complex processes (transfer, translate and transform) to move knowledge across boundaries. He also distinguishes between two types of knowledge: common knowledge - referring to a shared body of knowledge that allows for communication between actors (also referred to as *mutual knowledge* by Cramton [2001]) - and *domain*-specific knowledge, which is held by each party individually.

The syntactic boundary exists when there is a common knowledge and lexicon between the actors, so there is limited novelty in the knowledge. The movement of knowledge across the syntactic boundary is akin to information processing and occurs through the unidirectional and straightforward process of *transfer*. It could be argued that most knowledge movement interactions involve some degree of novelty, and therefore the transfer process as described by Carlile (2004) is the least appropriate process, but ironically the most frequently used.
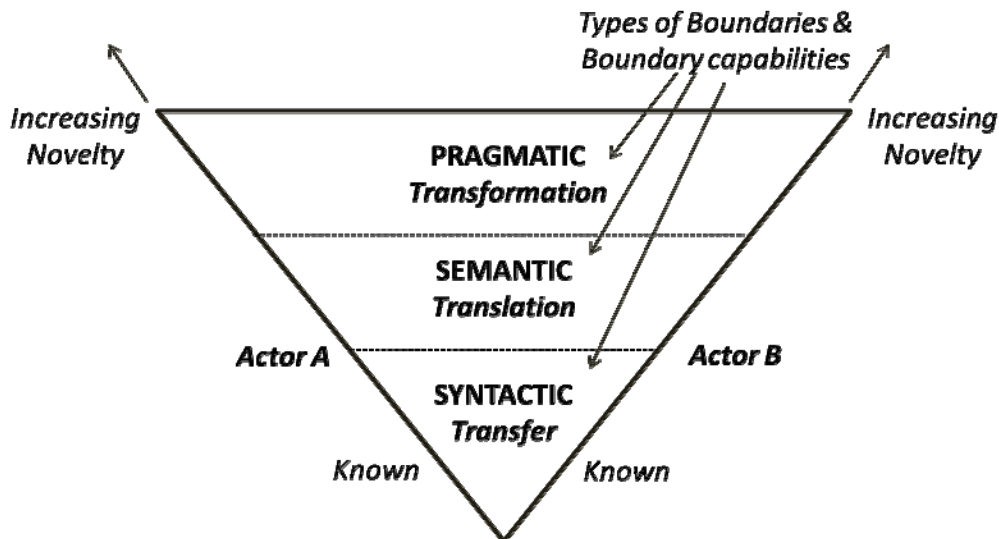
Figure 1: Carlile (2004) 3T framework for managing knowledge across boundaries

However, a transfer process becomes problematic when novelty arises such as new knowledge being added. An example from consulting engagements is when consultants introduce new terms to clients. In this context, a semantic or interpretive boundary is faced. The semantic boundary requires a process of *translating,* which entails establishing common meanings and reconciling discrepancies in meaning. When the translation boundary is crossed, conversation becomes the essence of the interaction: participants must engage in conversations and discourse to mutually share, interpret and construct their meanings, becoming co-authors in making sense of their interactions (Van de Ven, 2007, p.26).

Under certain circumstances, it is not only a matter of translating different meanings, but of negotiating interests and making trade-offs between actors. This is when the pragmatic (or political) boundary is faced. The required process then is *transforming*, which focuses on the development of common interests. At this boundary, all participants must find ways of transforming their domain-specific knowledge to apply in a new context.

Carlile (2002) also identifies different categories of boundary objects at each type of knowledge boundary. He describes the role of a boundary objects as a means of representing,

learning about and transforming knowledge to resolve the consequences that exist at a given boundary.

Type of knowledge boundary	Categories of Boundary Objects	Characteristics of Boundary Objects
Syntactic	Repositories	Representing
Semantic	Standardized forms and methods	Representing and Learning
Pragmatic	Objects, models and maps	Representing, Learning and Transforming

Table 2: Boundary objects at each knowledge boundary (Carlile, 2002, p.453).

Carlile's framework (2002, 2004) regards a *successful* knowledge shaping event as one where the appropriate process was applied to address the identified boundary. It does not explicitly address whether the knowledge shaping event had achieved the desired outcome, as the outcome is implied.

The study by Sturdy et al. (2007; 2009b) loosely approximated Carlile's 3T framework and considered boundaries specifically from the perspective of knowledge flows within a consultant-client interaction (consulting engagement). Three types of boundaries were identified, namely physical, cultural/knowledge, and political. The power dimension in the physical boundary considers who is physically included and excluded from interacting with the consultants. The cultural boundary is similar to Carlile's semantic boundary, with the key concept being the *cognitive distance* (as explained by Bogenrieder & Nooteboom, 2004) between parties. While some *otherness* is essential for learning to occur, this should not be too much. Weak ties and the traditional alien knowledge associated with the 'consultant as outsider' view results in exploration, but the burden of *otherness* is that it hinders the exchange of more tacit or complex knowledge and the exploitation of existing knowledge. The political boundary approximates Carlile's pragmatic boundary: 'Here knowledge needs

not only to be communicated (syntactic boundaries) and translated (semantic boundaries), but also transformed into something else.' (Sturdy et al., 2009b, p.37).

A key contribution of the study by Sturdy et al. is to be critical of the view that boundaries are synonymous with barriers, in other words that they are *dysfunctiona*l. Instead, they propose that boundaries are a means of communication and a necessary condition for knowledge flow and learning.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In keeping with a qualitative case study approach, multiple methods were employed to collect data. These constituted observation of key events or *moments of transition* of consultant-client interaction, semi-structured interviews, participant diaries and analysis of documents. 16 workshops were observed, comprising 32 hours of consultant-client interaction. A total of 41 interviews were conducted (16 with consultants, 21 with clients and four interviews with senior managers in the consultancy to better understand its context).

Data was collected longitudinally over three stages typical of a consulting engagement, namely *contracting*, *engagement* and *post-engagement,* as show in the following figure:

Figure 2: Three typical project lifecycle stages used to structure data collection

The contracting stage relates to the planning of the engagement and the setting of expectations as well as agreeing engagement outcomes and deliverables. Data collection in this stage therefore focused on obtaining a better understanding of the nature of the engagement, for instance the expected knowledge shaping process, implementation approach and expected outcomes. The engagement stage covers the formal consulting engagement,

including the planned client-consultant interactions. Data collection therefore focused on client-consultant interaction events and how these influenced the shaping of knowledge. The focus was also on describing the knowledge boundaries and understanding the processes employed to move knowledge across boundaries. Data collection was mainly through observation of formal engagement events. The post-engagement stage covers the point in time from when the engagement ends (the consultants leave the client site or handover the final deliverable). The focus of data collection at this stage was therefore on clients' experience of sharing engagement knowledge with the wider organisation and applying knowledge gained from the consulting engagement in their everyday working environment. Data collection aimed to build an understanding of how clients perceived the value obtained from the consulting engagement. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with client participants, asking them to reflect on their approaches and experiences, as well as an analysis of client diaries based on weekly documentation of experiences over a four week period.

Data was analysed in accordance with guidelines for qualitative data analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) and presented as themes. The unit of analysis was the consulting engagement.

The case

The case relates to eight consulting engagements undertaken by a not-for-profit management consultancy that delivers subsidised consulting services to SME's (Small & Medium Enterprises) in the Australian manufacturing industry. The consultancy has a distinctive consulting model in that the bulk of its income is derived from work that is fully or partly subsidised by the state government.

 The consultancy positions itself as a niche consultancy, stating that it provides '*specialist knowledge and expertise* to help manufacturers implement workforce development strategies,

operational enhancements and innovations, and to link industry with major projects, researchers and technology solutions. The consultancy is structured into three divisions, with the division observed for this research focusing on ways to improve clients' performance by implementing world-class best practice processes, innovative techniques and world-leading technologies.

It is interesting that with the consultancy there appears to be a strong sentiment that engagements are not *consulting* events, but instead that the consultancy is in the business of delivering *products (*such as benchmarks) to clients. The staff in the division observed were also not referred to as 'consultants', but rather *manufacturing specialists*. The division's General Manager indicated that this stemmed in part from a desire not to intimidate clients with the notion of a 'know-all consultant', but instead that '*the term manufacturing specialist implies an easy-going relationship with a real person who understands the client's day-to-day reality*'.

Eight separate engagements were observed as part of this study, as summarized in the following table:

	Client type	New client	Engagement type	Nr of clients at workshops	Nr of clients inter- viewed	Subsidy *
1	Food ingredient supplier	√	Manufacturing Strategy	3 Operations Director; Quality Manager; Prod Manager	1	Full
2	Concrete batching & mining equipment	√	MPSP Assessment	2 Office Manager Estimator	2	Full
3	Structural steel manufacturer		MPSP Assessment	W1: 2 W2: 3 Fin Controller; Prod Manager + consultant	2	Full

	Client type	New client	Engagement type	Nr of clients at workshops	Nr of clients inter-viewed	Subsidy *
4	Elevated work platforms manufacturer		Factory layout & VSM	W1: 15 W2: 5	3	Comm
5	Packaging solutions		MPSP Assessment	3 MD; General Manager; Operations Mgr	3	Full
6	Whiteboards (visual comms) products	√	5S, VSM & factory layout	W1: 12 (all staff) W2: 7 factory session W3: feedback to MD, Director, Production manager	3	50/50
7	Venetians & Blinds manufacturer		Innovation Strategy	W1: 9 W2: 11	4	50/50
8	Concrete haulage (regional)	√	BPSA	W1: 1 W2: 1	1	Full
				TOTAL	**19**	

* Subsidy: Full – 100% government subsidised; 50/50 half government/half client; Comm: 100% paid by client

Table 3: Overview of the eight engagements studied

For analysis and reporting, the eight engagements were grouped into three clusters according to the type of engagement and similarities in the focus and outcome of the engagement. The three clusters are described in the table below:

Cluster name	Engagement numbers and type of engagement	Cluster Focus & Outcome
Assessment	2, 3, 5 Structured 53-item questionnaire	Structured assessment with a view to improving tenders for major projects
Strategy	1 Manufacturing strategy 7 Innovation strategy 8 Business Strategy	Strategy development related to a specific business area
Business Process improvement	4 Factory layout & Value Stream Mapping (VSM) 6 5S, VSM & factory layout	Structured approach to making visible changes on the factory floor and improving production flow

Table 4: Overview of the three engagement clusters

One of the distinguishing characteristics of all eight engagements observed was the 'short, sharp' nature of the engagement. Most comprised only two formal interaction events (Workshops), ideally spaced within a week of each other. The short duration suited clients who were usually the owners/managers of their businesses and had many other pressures on their time. The engagements were delivered by individual consultants. All eight engagements also had as an end-point a key stated deliverable, either an action plan or a formal report. In terms of adopting a structured approach to the engagement delivery, the Assessment engagements were the most structured, followed by Business process improvement. The Strategic engagements allowed the most leeway for consultants to adapt the approach (or delivery) to suit the client needs.

FINDINGS

Management Consultants actively managed knowledge boundary crossing during workshops

During all the workshops, management consultants were observed actively managing all three types of knowledge boundaries and boundary processes. In the majority of instances, the consultants identified the knowledge boundaries and initiated the boundary crossing behaviours. Workshop participants (clients) seldom initiated boundary crossing behaviours but would occasionally signal a boundary, usually by posing a direct question to the consultant. The consultant's choice of process with which to address such as knowledge boundary was not questioned, as was evident from the absence of challenging behaviours observed from clients. .

Clients acted primarily as information providers to consultants, engaging a transfer process. This would typically take place in workshop 1 as consultants gathered information to document and at times quantify the client organization's current state, or the *as is,* as it is commonly referred to by consultants. For instance, in the assessment cluster engagements (2,

3 and 5) clients verbally relayed their scores on each item to the consultant, who would input these into a spreadsheet. Based on the scores, the consultant provided an overview of the current situation (*as is*) at the end of workshop 1. However, in feeding back the scores to the client at the end of the workshop – also an apparent transfer process – consultants added additional comments about addressing areas of low scores (typically 1's and 2's). This is an example of consultants initiating a higher order boundary process – in this example reaching toward the pragmatic boundary by encouraging the client to think about possible solutions. In engagement 2, the consultant framed the feedback in terms of opportunities for improvement: '*So we're here to talk about the low hanging fruit; to address the 1's and the 2's*'. Referring to the client organization's low score on staff involvement, the consultant offered, '*Your area with most opportunity for growth, as we say, is communication and responsiveness*'. These examples point to the potential later in the workshops for consultants to use the scores as a means of expanding the discussion space beyond the syntactic boundary toward the pragmatic boundary.

Consultants were observed employing techniques such as *interpreting* and *rephrasing* client information to address the semantic boundary. In that sense, the semantic boundary space became blurred with the syntactic and pragmatic spaces. For instance, in engagements 2 and 3 - both new clients – workshop participants questioned consultants about the meaning of the term *DIFOT* (Delivery in Full and On Time). In both instances, the consultants initially engaged an appropriate translation process by introducing the term and explaining its meaning to client participants. However, consultants then evoked a pragmatic boundary by also talking about the implications of adopting a *DIFOT* approach within the client organization – as illustrated by this response from the consultant in engagement 2: '*If you've delivered half of that before the due date, that's DIFOT. And that's a key performance indicator.*' As this comment illustrates, the consultant was using the translation opportunity

to evoke the pragmatic boundary by encouraging clients to think about how they would apply a DIFOT approach to their organization.

In the case of engagement 1, the consultant asked the client for information about the organization's 'purpose and vision' and started writing that up. However, the client seemed to be struggling with verbalizing the concepts, so the consultant stepped in and appeared to *interpret* and *rephrase* the client's information, seemingly employing a transformation process to address the semantic boundary by responding, '*So part of your vision is to become part of the client's supply chain.*'

Translation was the most frequently observed process employed by consultants during the consulting engagements. This finding supports the general notion that consulting is a 'language game' and linguistically enacted. Across all engagement clusters, consultants faced a semantic boundary where they were required to introduce new concepts or terms to clients. Examples of some of these terms per cluster were:

Assessment cluster	DIFOT; 5S
Strategy cluster	DIFOT; DIFOTIS; 7 wastes; 5S
Business process improvement cluster	5S, Value Stream Mapping (VSM), LEAN manufacturing; DIFOT; 7 wastes

Table 5: New terms introduced by consultants

It is interesting to note that several of the new terms typically related to a product or service offered by the consultancy, thereby establishing the consultancy lexicon as solution and pointing to the potential of further work.

There were limited examples of clients being asked to translate their business lexicon to the consultant. This did not necessarily mean that clients did not already apply similar concepts within their organization. For instance, in engagement 1, the client's Managing Director responded in the post-engagement interview to the concept of *5S* as introduced by the

consultant, '*We already do that in our business; we just call it something different.*' Translation as applied by consultants therefore appears to have been a one-way process to introduce clients to the consultancy's solution lexicon and not necessarily an interactive process of establishing common meanings with clients.

While clients did not actively engage with consultants in the translation process, workshop participants did resolve the semantic boundary amongst themselves. For instance, in workshop 2 of engagement 3, participants were trying to agree on the meaning of '*good management*' in the context of their business. The consultant did not respond, so one of the workshop participants offered: '*Good management is the CEO letting us do what we do … we don't have the ability to make the decisions we should in our role.*' The consultant also did not appear to pick up on the participant's implied statement that the owner of the business was hampering decision-making in the organization.

Management consultants created aspirational boundary spaces

One of the common observations across the eight engagements was that consultants frequently responded to a semantic boundary – which calls for a *translation* process – by evoking the pragmatic boundary. Consultants would do this by painting a picture of an ideal future state (or the *to be* in a gap analysis approach) and implying that the client should aspire to that. This ideal state image appeared particularly powerful as it related directly to clients' stated reasons, as described during the pre-engagement interviews, for embarking on the consulting engagement. The ideal future state picture was evoked in different ways for each engagement cluster and mainly through the use of new terminology, examples, and case studies:

i.   For the Assessment cluster the implied ideal was *high scores* of 4's and 5's on the 53-item questionnaire. Implied in this was the outcome – aligned with client

expectations – that high scores would result in more successful tenders for large scale projects.

ii. Consultants in the Business process improvement cluster were less specific in describing the ideal, drawing on more general statements such as '*become a world class manufacturing organization*' and '*being on the journey to LEAN manufacturing*'. Consultants did make extensive use in workshop 1 – a general education session – of visual examples, such as *before* and *after* photographs of other clients' factory floors. This had the result of establishing the ideal state as a visual standard.

iii. The Strategy cluster engagements were the least specific in terms of describing the ideal state. Extensive use was made of examples from both manufacturing and non-manufacturing contexts as well as case studies. However the ideal *to be* state was not described in detail.

The general effect of consultants painting an ideal state picture was to create enthusiasm among client participants and build client confidence. Client enthusiasm was observed as a willingness to participate in the consulting engagement by contributing to the workshop input and also by appearing receptive to the consultant's message. Client confidence was evidenced through statements by clients that they believed the ideal state as described by the consultant was achievable and that they could implement the ideas without consultant assistance. A comment from the General Manager in engagement 7 typifies this client perspective: '*The workshop was as much about getting us to believe that we can do this as it was about new ideas.*'

In some of the engagements, consultants supported the description of the ideal state with techniques to build client confidence. This took place by actually moving away from the pragmatic boundary (once clearly established as the ideal) and applying a translation process to establish a common meaning and have clients adopt the solution lexicon. In this manner, clients would not feel threatened by facing a pragmatic boundary in the workshop but only had to address the semantic boundary.

While consultants drew on *ideal type* boundary objects to paint the aspirational picture – pointing to the pragmatic boundary – consultants still predominantly employed a *translation* process in describing the ideal state. For instance, consultants used examples of existing organizations as a means of establishing a common interpretation of what the *ideal* could look like. However, consultants did not engage in a process of negotiating interests with clients or creating new knowledge through the discussion.

Consultants would also blur the semantic and pragmatic boundary spaces through the use of brainstorming. Consultants across all three engagement clusters employed the brainstorming technique to obtain input and participation from clients (it should be noted however that this is not the classic brainstorming technique, but used by the consultants to describe a process of going round the room and obtaining client input). The application of this technique evoked some notions of the co-creation of ideas and therefore touched on the pragmatic boundary. However, consultants still drew on a transfer process by capturing client information without visibly transforming the input.

Missed opportunities for transformation

One of the most consistent observations from the eight engagements was that, while the pragmatic boundary was touched on at several points during the workshop interactions, the boundary was generally not bridged during the workshops. Based on the post-engagement interviews and client diaries, it was evident that any transformation of ideas that took place happened outside the formal interaction setting (workshops) and did not involve consultants and clients as co-creators of knowledge. Instead, the parties seemed to carry out their own transformation process in isolation. The promise of transformation was therefore not fulfilled.

During the workshops, several instances were observed where the discussion moved toward the pragmatic boundary, potentially offering an opportunity to bridge this boundary by

applying a transformation process. However, these turned out to be missed opportunities. When an opportunity for transformation presented itself, the consultant would actively manage the discussion away from the pragmatic boundary space. For instance, the consultant would open the pragmatic space in setting up an aspirational goal for the client. But in an almost teasing fashion, the consultant would then withdraw from this process despite an enthusiastic client response. This type of boundary management behaviour was particularly evident in the strategy engagement cluster. For instance, early in workshop 1, the client in engagement 8 indicated that she had '*flamboyant plans*' for the business. However, the consultant responded by referring to a syntactic boundary object: '*You'll get a one page action plan at the end of the workshops to assist you*'.

With the innovation strategy engagement (engagement 7), the consultant used several examples as boundary objects to paint the aspirational picture. The consultant drew on famous brands such as Apple, Coca-Cola and Toyota, to support this message, even though these examples were not related to the client's industry as manufacturer of window blinds and awnings. The client responded very favourably to the ideal type examples, even jokingly referring to their future products as '*iblinds*'. This showed that the client was open to engaging with the consultant at the pragmatic boundary level. Despite the promise held within this interaction, the consultant ended the engagement with an action-planning process and development of a syntactic boundary object. The consultant appeared to do some *transformation* of ideas during the action planning process, for instance re-ordering and re-wording action points, but did not explain to the client what he was doing. Therefore, no co-creation of knowledge took place as the consultant made the changes unilaterally and then presented these to the client as the solution.

In engagement 8, the consultant started mapping the client's supply chain relationships. The client responded enthusiastically, perhaps sensing that an opportunity for transformation and

knowledge co-creation was arising. However, in an almost teasing fashion, the consultant abandoned the half drawn map, commenting '*... it's not about channels, it's about business models. But not something we will solve today ... something to think about'.*

The only instances where consultants seemed to engage with clients at the pragmatic boundary related to discussions around the delivery of the engagement and the engagement process, such as identifying individuals to participate in the workshops.

Engagement 5 was the one client that showed the ability to transform knowledge within the workshop sessions. This happened primarily through client dialogue, with client participants appearing to develop their own answers. The consultant took a back seat from these discussions and would occasionally add input that appeared to move the process along. It is interesting that the engagement 5 organization was the most experienced of all eight organizations observed in the use of consultants. Client participants also described their organization culture as open to change, with the Operations Manager commenting '*There are no holy cows here…'* during workshop 1.

Syntactic level boundary objects as outcome

For clients and consultants, the presentation of a document – in this case action plans and reports - signified the end of the formal consulting engagement. In consulting terminology, this document is typically referred to as a *deliverable,* indicating that consultants actively work throughout the engagement to compile and present this artefact to clients. Consultants were very aware of this and were working toward the deliverable from the start of the engagement, as well as indicating to clients during the workshops that a deliverable would be the outcome of the engagement. While clients understood that they would need to implement the changes themselves, they did not seem to realize the potential for transformation that could have been linked to the action plan. The action plan started off as a pragmatic level

boundary object where it had the potential to be applied in knowledge transformation and co-creation. However, the development of the action plans during the workshops offer a further example of a missed opportunity for transformation. While clients gave some input and ideas for the action plan, much of the *transformation* in terms of finalizing and structuring the reports and actions plans happened outside the workshop setting. The consultants therefore took on the role *experts*, by taking the information offered by clients, adding their own expert knowledge, and then presenting the deliverables back to clients as a *solution* to be implemented. This example further shows how consultants directed the pragmatic boundary space. The reports and action plans were presented to clients as completed knowledge objects not in need of further discussion or amendment. Deliverables also did not explicitly address the continuation of the knowledge shaping process or the embedding of the engagement knowledge within the client's organizational context.

Clients' perception of the consulting engagement value

An analysis of clients' perceptions of value from the consulting engagements yielded several interesting insights. First, as expected, clients did not find the engagements of significant value in terms of new knowledge delivered. Second, clients' assessment of value was not significantly impacted by whether or not they implemented actions, as described in the action plans, in the four weeks following the engagement. And third – and perhaps most interesting – was that clients did find value from the engagements, but in rather unexpected ways.

The value expressed by clients in post-engagement interviews and diaries related to several points. Clients found value in participating in the engagement, as it offered them an opportunity to reflect on their business in a structured manner and even learn more about their organization's current state from colleagues. Clients also valued the role of the consultants as independent facilitators offering specific expertise and a structured way to

think through their issues. As explained earlier, several clients expressed the view that participation in the engagement gave them the confidence that they could implement the changes without assistance from the consultant.

An interesting finding related to the use of engagement knowledge within the client organization, was that - while the engagement event (boundary interaction) did not necessarily result in transformation of knowledge - it did provide clients with new ways of thinking and approaching problems to feel sufficiently confident to address the pragmatic boundary themselves after the end of the formal engagement. Clients did not rush out and implement the actions, but first took time to reflect on the findings and recommendations individually. This did not involve an assessment of the engagement's knowledge value, but rather a *thinking through* process of how to incorporate and balance the engagement actions with other organizational priorities. Clients therefore engaged in their own transformation process by thinking through how to incorporate engagement knowledge into the client context before actually taking on the actions. Descriptions such as '*thinking differently*' about something provided clues that clients were first embedding the knowledge for themselves before enacting these within the organisational context. Clients also reported *using different language* after the engagement – most notably adopting the term DIFOTIS.

DISCUSSION

Carlile's (2002, 2004) description of boundary crossing behaviours in innovation contexts paints a picture of a linear, consecutive process – a boundary is reached, identified and can be bridged successfully if the appropriate knowledge movement process is applied to the boundary. A higher order boundary that is attempted to be bridged with an inferior process will not be successfully crossed. The order seems to be that the boundary is identified first; then the appropriate process is applied. However, the observations of the consulting

engagements show a more dynamic interplay between *boundary identification* and *bridging process*, most frequently observed as taking place within the semantic boundary/translation process. There were many instances of boundary bridging processes being applied to address specific boundaries. Interestingly however, consultants would also appear to actively create or evoke a boundary by injecting a higher order bridging process into the discussion.

The most frequently observed bridging process was the *translation* process which would be extended by the consultant to reach into the pragmatic boundary domain. This reinforces the idea that consultants do not necessarily focus on knowledge co-creation with clients, but rather on the development and handover of a codified knowledge object. Even within an interaction setting, the focus of the consultant remained on the delivery of a knowledge product. While consultants may have regarded the development of this document as a knowledge co-creation activity with clients, in terms of what was observed workshops, the final document was a codified knowledge object containing the consultant's lexicon and hence framing of knowledge.

Consultants directed the boundary bridging processes during consulting engagements. Consultants also displayed behaviours related to *boundary evoking* - where they actively employed a higher level knowledge shaping process to establish a knowledge boundary. The purpose of this can be interpreted as aspirational - in terms of the use of the gap analysis technique in engagements, consultants were observed employing boundary shifting behaviours to create an aspirational boundary space at the pragmatic level for clients. However, consultants did not bridge the pragmatic boundary during workshops, which supports their focus on creating a knowledge object and not knowledge transformation per se.

Based on the findings, the intriguing point is therefore raised that consultant-client interaction events, as represented by workshops, are not the most appropriate settings to support

knowledge co-creation and transformation. Instead, transformation that takes place is undertaken by clients themselves, during or after the workshops. While numerous missed opportunities for transformation were observed, this did not result in clients regarding the engagement as without value. Clients benefited from participating in a structured session facilitated by an impartial consultant with expert knowledge. The observed interactions showed that the expert perspective of client-consultant interaction was prevalent, which is different to the popular belief that the social learning model representing consultant and client co-creation of knowledge is the most popular.

CONCLUSION

This aim of this paper was to contribute to an understanding of what *actually* takes place during consulting engagements by analysing observations and interview responses from eight consulting engagements undertaken by a niche consultancy in Australia. It drew on knowledge boundary frameworks and showed how consultants actively manage and engage boundary crossing processes. However, consultant-client interaction settings are shown to not be conducive to knowledge transformation with numerous missed opportunities for knowledge transformation evident.

REFERENCE LIST

Abrahamson, E. (1996) Management Fashion. *Academy of Management Review,* 21(*1*), 254-285.

Alvesson, M. (2004). *Knowledge work and knowledge-intensive firms.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Alvesson, M., Kärreman, D., Sturdy, A. & Handley, K. (2009). Unpacking the client(s): Constructions, positions and client-consultant dynamics. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 25(*3*), 253-263.

Anand, V., Glick, W.H. & Manz, C.C. (2002). "Thriving on the knowledge of outsiders: Tapping organizational social capital. *Academy of Management Executive*, 16(*1*), 87-101.

Berglund, J. & Werr, A. (2000). The invincible character of management consulting rhetoric: How one blends incommensurates while keeping them apart. *Organization,* 7(*4*), 633-655.

Buono, A.E. (Ed.) (2002). *Developing Knowledge and Value in Management Consulting.* Greenwich: Information Age Publishing.

Carlile, P. R. (2002). A pragmatic view of knowledge and boundaries: Boundary objects in new product development. *Organization Science,* 13, 442-455.

Carlile, P. R. (2004). Transferring, Translating, and Transforming: An Integrative Framework for Managing Knowledge Across Boundaries. *Organization Science,* 15(*5*), 555-568.

Clark, T. (1995). *Managing Consultants: Consultancy as the Management of Impressions.* Buckingham, Open University Press.

Clark, T. & Salaman, G. (1998). Creating the 'right' impression: Towards a dramaturgy of management consultancy. *Service Industries Journal,* 18(*1*), 18-38.

Collins, D. (June 2006). Assaying the 'Advice Industry'. *Culture and Organization,* 12(*2*), 139-152.

Curnow, B. & Reuvid, J. (eds.) (2003). *The international guide to management consultancy.* Sterling, USA, Kogan Page.

Czarniawska, B. & Mazza, C. (2003). Consulting as a liminal space. *Human Relations,* 56(*3*), 267-290.

Fincham, R. (May 1999). The Consultant-Client Relationship: Critical Perspectives on the Management of Organizational Change. *Journal of Management Studies*, *36(3)*, 335-351.

Handley, K.T., Clark, T., Fincham, R., & Sturdy. A. (2007). Researching situated learning - Participation, identity and practices in client-consultant relationships. *Management Learning,* 38(*2*), 173-191.

Hicks, J., Nair, P., & Wilderom, C.P.M. (2009). What if We Shifted the Basis of Consulting from Knowledge to Knowing? *Management Learning, 40*(*3*), 289-310.

Höner, D. & Mohe, M. (2009). Behind clients' doors: What hinders client firms from "professionally" dealing with consultancy? *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 25(*3*), 299-312.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leonard-Barton, D. (1995). *Wellsprings of Knowledge: Building and sustaining the sources of innovation.* Boston, Mass., Harvard Business School Press.

Luo, W.H. & Liberatore, M.J. (2009). Achieving IT consultant objectives through client project success. *Information & Management,* 46(*5)*, 259-266.

Nikolova, N., M., Reihlen, M., & Schlapfner, J.F. (2009). Client-consultant interaction: Capturing social practices of professional service production. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 25(*3*), 289-298.

Pellegrin-Boucher, E. (2006). Symbolic functions of consultants. *Journal of General Management,* 32(2), 1-16.

Schein, E. H. (1999). *Process consultation revisited: building the helping relationship.* Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing.

Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* New York: Basic Books.

Shannon, C. E. & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication.* Chicago, IL., University of Chicago Press.

Sturdy, A., Handley, K., Clark, T. & Fincham, R. (2007). *Re-thinking the role of management consultants as disseminators of business knowledge - knowledge flows, directions and conditions in consulting projects.* Conference paper delivered at OLKC 'Learning Fusion' (2007).

Sturdy, A., Clark, T., Fincham, R. & Handley, K. (2009a). Between Innovation and Legitimation-Boundaries and Knowledge Flow in Management Consultancy. *Organization,* 16(*5*), 627-653.

Sturdy, A., Handley, K., Clark, T. & Fincham, R. (2009b). *Management Consultancy: Boundaries and knowledge in action.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sturdy, A., Werr, A. & Buono, A.F. (2009c). The client in management consultancy research: Mapping the territory. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 25(*3*), 247-252.

Van de Ven, A.H. (2007). *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research.* New York, Oxford University Press.

Van Nistelrooij, A., de Caluwe, L. & Schouten, N. (2007). Management Consultants' Colourful Ways of Looking at Change: An Explorative Study under Dutch Management Consultants. *Journal of Change Management,* 17(*3-4*), 243-254.

Wenger, E. (2003). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Knowing in Organizations: A Practice-based approach.* D. Nicolini, S. Gherardi & D. Yanow (eds.). Armonk, N.Y., ME Sharpe, 76-91.