

OD consultancy as a spiritual ministry

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Do you need to feel called to what you do? Does God have a unique contribution he wants you to make? Is there a specific purpose for which you were created? Difficult questions, possibly with a myriad of contentious theological interpretations. I obviously cannot answer for anyone else, but personally I find having a clear sense of calling makes a big difference. I feel called to OD consultancy. This gives me a sense of higher purpose and meaning to my everyday work. It gives me practical direction to choose what work to take and what to avoid. It helps me deal with the inherent frustrations of my OD consultancy profession. And it also pushes me to learn and develop myself further. Feeling called to OD also forces me to ensure that the way I do consultancy is consistent with what I believe. It constantly challenges me to give my very best to any client.

Creating Space for Grace

I am really bothered by how we so often separate the spiritual and the professional in organisational life and also in change. Some might call it a 'holy discontent'. I think there is often a false dichotomy between the sacred and the spiritual. Over the last few years I have felt more and more strongly that my 'calling' is to bring God's presence and power into professional organisational change – to create space for grace. Currently much of this is done through OD consultancy. So I see my consultancy work as a spiritual ministry.

Feeling that OD consultancy is my calling or ministry means that no piece of work can be 'just a job'. It is something that has higher purpose and meaning. This makes me more discerning (some would say choosy) about the work I take on. It means I turn down a lot of offers of work and point them somewhere else. While this might not appeal to all potential clients, it does mean that I am deeply excited by almost all the work I do take on.

OD adventures with God

I remember last year, when I was invited to assist the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, thinking two things: 'Help! I have no idea what to do in such a place' and almost at the same time: 'Yes! This was what I was created for'.

Every new consultancy is an adventure with God; an opportunity to see God in action in the work I do. I love it. But it is scary too. I am never sure what will happen. It is rarely as I expect; also not always as I hope. But it is always a learning experience in my relationship with God. It is not a problem, and may even be better, to be operating outside our comfort zone. In fact my clearest experiences of God's presence come from organisational consultancies rather than any mountain-top moments in church.

Patience and Perspective

Feeling called to my work helps me deal with the inherent frustrations of OD consultancy. It can be a lonely profession. It often has demanding and erratic workloads. It can be unrewarding. A consultant's presence in an organisation is temporary. As soon as things get and interesting I sometimes find my time is up. I often have to walk away. Others get on with the real work of change.

Clients, perhaps especially churches, move at their own pace. This is rarely the same as mine. They tend to have much bigger outside issues to deal with than I do. The planned change process almost always gets delayed by other more urgent priorities. I frequently find myself waiting, impatiently wishing they would hurry up. But then I have to remember, whose process is this? I have found Archbishop Romero's prayer a powerful reminder of the limitations (and potential) of our contribution. It is important to keep our contribution in perspective.

Five-Fold Ministry in OD?

Seeing my consultancy as ministry enables me to see things differently... It means that when I read the Bible and Ephesians 4 talks about the five-fold ministry, I wonder: 'what can I learn from this for the consultancy I do?' Thinking about this, I realise that in my consultancy there are times I play the role of:

teacher;
pastor;
evangelist;
prophet; and perhaps sometimes even
apostle.

I am often a teacher in a consultancy, demystifying terms like strategy, giving input from others' experiences or drawing out people's learning. Increasingly I find I need to play a pastoral role, particularly with leaders who are often over-stretched and unsupported or in resolving conflict between people. Sometimes I feel I have to be an evangelist convincing key people about way forward. Occasionally I have felt that God has given me a particular prophetic word for a client (something that I do not take lightly, and probably should have the courage to do more). And the apostolic ministry? I am not sure yet. What I do know is that I need to be equipped to play these different roles well. I also know that even in supposedly secular organisational consultancy I can do full-time Christian work.

Character in consultancy

Ultimately all you really bring into an OD situation is yourself. Yes you may have tools and questions, exercises and favoured processes. But ultimately it is about the skills you have which you need to use and adapt to each unique situation. OD consultancy that adds value demands certain skills. It requires the ability to plan carefully, to listen deeply, to analyse a chaotic context and weigh different opinions, to facilitate people to come to agreement, to write accessible and accurate reports. But more than simply skills,

consultancy demands character.

Earlier this year I was sitting down with a potential client and was beginning to ask them about the task they needed doing. The Chief Executive stopped me and said: 'No, before we get onto all that, tell me about yourself. Tell me about what matters to you. Tell me about your life journey. Then we'll see whether we can work together.' I was taken aback and then impressed. He knew that more than having a full OD toolkit, what is needed is people with sensitivity, wisdom, judgement, vision, empathy, compassion, humility, understanding, faith. We cannot help bring what we are to what we do.

This is profoundly challenging. It forces me to realise that I cannot divorce my professional life from my spiritual life. I bring my character (which D.L. Moody says is 'what you are in the dark') into the client. I know that as an OD consultant I often have the privilege of being invited into the guts of an organisation. We get special access. We get to ask questions no-one else can. We are given time that no-one else is. I get asked to facilitate processes that deal with the very identity of the client. Yet with such privilege comes responsibility. Decisions that are made affect people's jobs, their lives and their own sense of identity. We have to tread softly on peoples' lives. We are responsible for bringing the best of ourselves to our work.

Bringing my best

But how do I work out what is my best? How do I ensure that I do bring my best into each situation? A few years ago I spent some time trying to work out what I believed about the process of human change and therefore organisational change. I reflected on all my experience with organisations and leaders. I went through the Bible trying to interpret what it said to me. I thought about changes in my own life. What I was left with was my theory of change (in fact a theology of change). To bring my best to my consultancy means that I have work in ways consistent with what I believe. This is what it means to have integrity - to not separate our beliefs from our actions.

So from my understanding of change I wrote down the implications for me as an OD consultant. These turned out to be quality standards - the text box below shows the headlines. I would not dream of saying they are universal standards for others, but they at least help me hold myself to account. The full list can be downloaded from: [HYPERLINK "http://www.missioncouncil.se/download/18.5004bd9712b572e3de6800017678/Consultancy+Quality+Standards+Rick+James.doc"](http://www.missioncouncil.se/download/18.5004bd9712b572e3de6800017678/Consultancy+Quality+Standards+Rick+James.doc) <http://www.missioncouncil.se/download/18.5004bd9712b572e3de6800017678/Consultancy+Quality+Standards+Rick+James.doc>

I now use these standards in all my OD work. When planning a consultancy, I use them to make sure what I am suggesting is consistent with what I believe. When tendering for work I make sure I send these to potential clients, so that they know what they are getting (or at least the approach I aspire to take). Sometime in the middle of most of my assignments I go back and check, 'how am I doing?' And at the end I also stop and reflect on what went well and what could have been improved.

Yesterday I got an email from the trustee of a client who was unhappy with a report I have just done for them. So I went back to these standards and asked myself hard questions – have I really lived up to this here? In some places I felt sure the problem was not on my side. In others I felt I should have done better. This helped me think through what should be the next steps, trying to rectify my errors and aiming that my consultancy is full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The Power of Calling

We can be called to OD consultancy (though obviously not everyone is). A clear calling is a powerful thing. But anything powerful has the potential for abuse. At all costs, we must avoid the self-importance that sometimes comes with a sense of calling. As Romero reminds us ‘we are ministers, not Messiahs’. If we lose our humility and our love for others in the process, we have lost everything. So it is incredibly important for us as consultants to work hard on our own character; to keep ourselves spiritually fit. We have to build up protection against pride. Having a clear calling brings considerable responsibilities. Much is demanded from those to whom much is given (Luke 12:48).

Outline Consultancy Quality Standards

In every consultancy I do, I commit myself to:

Ensure the client takes responsibility for change.

Understand the situation from the client’s perspective

Take a people-centred approach

Address relationships (including leadership) within the organisation.

Create safe, ‘sacred’ spaces in change processes

Integrate a spiritual dimension by

prayer, listening to God;

ensuring opportunities for God’s Holy Spirit to work;

following a Biblical process of change, including repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation;

using the Bible with discernment and

focusing on life-giving spiritual elements such as vision, values, hope

Attend to the implementation of change,

Live out spiritual virtues as of humility, compassion, patience, determination; generosity; self-control; honesty

A colleague, Peter Simpson, put it graphically

Individual/
Interpersonal

Pastoring

Evangelising

Apostolic

Organisation-
Wide

Teaching

Prophesying

Importance/Urgency
Need for change