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The functions of methods of change in management consulting

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Introduction

Detailed methods and tools for bringing about change are widespread in both the management literature (see e.g. Werr, 1995) and consultants' practice. The legitimacy of methods and tools is generally based on a belief in the effectiveness of their direct application in the change process. However, there also exists a belief, not least among consultants, that it is the consultant's personal skills and experiences, rather than the methods *per se*, that provide value in the consulting process. Based on an interview study in five large management consulting companies, this article tries to understand the popularity of methods and tools by identifying the content and function of methods and tools for business process re-engineering (BPR). We conclude that methods and tools have a number of functions in both the consulting organization and the change process. These functions are based mainly on the ability of methods and tools to provide a common interface to the change process.

The paper examines also the question of whether differences in consulting companies' traditions concerning focused problems are reflected in the content and use of methods.

"Approaches", "methods" and "tools": definitions

The terms "approach", "method" and "tool" are often used as synonyms in the context of organizational change. In this paper we will attempt to give these terms rather more specific meanings.

The most general of the terms is *approach*, which describes an overall perspective on the phenomenon of change and how to bring it about. An approach thus includes implicit and explicit beliefs concerning both the content and the process of "good" change. The socio-technical approach to change is one such example. Beliefs about the "good" content of change include the simultaneous optimization of both the technical and the social systems. Beliefs about "good" processes include broad participation as a central element.

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Methods of change are, in our view, subordinate to an *approach* to change. While an approach describes the underlying values of a change, a method attacks the problem of how to achieve it – how to manage the successful change process. Methods thus give operational guidance to actors in the change process. This guidance often has the form of step-by-step models of the change process, defining what should be done when, how, why and by whom.

While a method of change gives the change process its overall structure, it is seldom very helpful when specific problems are encountered during the process. Here *tools* find their role. Tools are focused on solving specific problems (e.g. the format for a group dynamic session). The support they give in problem solving can take the form of checklists, computer analysis applications, questionnaires, etc. Tools may have loose ties to specific methods. Thus, the same tools can be used in change processes guided by many different methods. This paper focuses mainly on methods as defined above.

Availability and use of methods in five consulting companies

In order to gain a deeper understanding of management consultants' use of methods for change and the roles these methods play in the practice of consultants, we conducted an interview study covering five consulting businesses. Four of them are large US-based management consulting firms with offices in Sweden (Andersen Consulting, the Boston Consulting Group, Ernst & Young Management Consulting, and McKinsey & Co.), and the fifth is a Swedish business, affiliated to Asea Brown Boweri (ABB), a major international industrial corporation (ABB Management and Process Consultants – ABB-MAC). The consultancies are among the 18 largest management consultants in Sweden (see Table I). The selection criterion for these companies were that they

	Rank[a]	Income 1995 (million SEK)	Number of employees 1995	Consultants 1995	Income per consulting project (thousand SEK)
McKinsey & Co.	1	449	163	106	4236
Andersen Consulting	2	422	312	310	1360
Boston Consulting Group	3	155	68	44	3525
Ernst & Young Management Consultants	9	69	44	37	1851
ABB Management Consultants	18	38	43	34	1118

Note: [a] Rank represents the companies rank in the Swedish management consulting business, with regard to its income in 1995. US$1 = SEK 7.50

Source: *Affärsvärldens Konsultguiden* (1996)

Table I.
Some numbers on the studied consultancies in Sweden

had to offer methods for change which are based on a *business process view* of organizations.

The semi-structured interviews with the consultants focused on four main areas:

(1) the content of the method for process improvement (the philosophy behind the method, the main steps, etc.);

(2) the form of the method (level of detail, structure, incorporated tools, etc.);

(3) the application of the method as reflected in the consultants' description of a recent project; and

(4) the mechanisms for creating and updating the method.

In each company we tried to get answers to the above questions from consultants with different levels of seniority. In three of the five organizations (ABB, McKinsey and Ernst & Young) we interviewed three consultants ranging from quite newly recruited to very experienced. We interviewed two consultants on different levels in Andersen Consulting and one on an intermediate level in BCG. It is important also to underline that the use of interviews for data collection confines our data to what the consultants say they do rather than what they actually do. We have tried to reduce this problem somewhat by asking the consultants for concrete examples of their ways of working.

The reason for focusing on process improvement methods is the popularity these have gained during recent years. All larger management consulting companies have in some way included the concept of BPR in their service portfolios. The process view of the organization *per se* is not new. It has been an important trait in socio-technical systems theory, which has roots back in the 1950s. What is new is the scope of the processes of interest. This often was limited to a group or department in a company, whereas today it comprises the whole company or even several companies. This broad cross-functional process view has been spreading rapidly, replacing a functional approach to business improvements.

In spite of a focus on a common problem – the improvement of business processes – the five consulting companies studied here are quite diverse in terms of their types and backgrounds. Large differences traditionally have existed between these companies concerning typical clients, typical assignments and the availability and use of methods. The question of whether such differences persist, or whether there is a convergence taking place, will be treated below, where the availability and usage of methods for process improvement in the studied companies is described, based on the data gathered during the interviews with the consultants.

McKinsey & Co.

Methods for process improvement. McKinsey's process improvement projects are quite large normally, extending for at least six months in time. Even their

scope is large, typically covering the fundamental redesign of the core processes of an organization.

The method used for these process improvements is "core process redesign" (CPR). The CPR approach has recently been formalized on a detailed level. The methodology now defines actions, deliverables etc. on a week-to-week (from one team meeting to the next) basis in the initial programme phases. The formalization also includes recurrent solutions for problems in specific core processes and industries. CPR projects normally follow a sequence of four high level phases (see Table II).

Besides the comprehensive CPR methodology, which gives an overall structure to the change process, McKinsey has a large toolbox for solving specific problems encountered in the process, such as the mapping and analysing of specific processes, the design of a logistics system etc. These tools are an important complement to CPR in the change process.

McKinsey (CPR)	E&Y (Navigator)	ABB-MAC (RBG methodology)	Andersen Consulting (Value driven re-engineering)	BCG (TBM)
1. Prepare the programme	1. Improvement portfolio analysis	1. Project definition	1. Shared vision (of strategy in organization)	1. Preparation and pre-structuring (of change process and target)
2. Launch first wave of microcosms	2. Future state definition	2. "Is" analysis	2. Assess/align (map, bench-mark, identify improvement programmes)	2. Gain under-standing (map and measure)
3. Launch additional waves	3. Pilot	3. "Should be" analysis	3. Master plan (plan improve-ment activities)	3. Develop alter-natives (model system, assess alternatives, develop action plan)
4. Move into continuous improvement *modus operandi*	4. Implementation	4. Implementation planning	4. Design (of improvement initiatives)	4. Take action
	5. Infrastructure definition		5. Pilot	5. Realize benefits
			6. Implement	
			7. Operate	

Table II. The main phases in process improvement projects in the consultancies studied

An important ingredient in McKinsey's approach to problems is hypothesis-driven problem solving. Here, the consultant establishes early on an hypothesis for a problem's solution. Then data is collected in order to prove this solution right or wrong.

Views on and use of methods. The main conviction steering McKinsey's views on methods is that of the uniqueness of the specific change process. The standard procedures provided by methods consequently always have to be adapted to fit the specific situation characterized by a certain history, problem, culture, etc. In order to ensure the fit between the method and the client's situation, change projects start with a strategic review, supported by a formalized approach and checklists. This assessment forms the basis for choosing an appropriate method.

Although the method does not solve all problems, it is seen by the consultants as an important support which provides an overall structure to the change process, so improving the chances of success. On the other hand, using the method to take shortcuts is in some cases claimed to have led to less than optimal results. Methods are used to support McKinsey's ambition to involve the client in the process as much as possible in order to create ownership and competence on the way to a learning organization. A clear method provides the client with a "road map", which facilitates his/her active involvement.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG)

Methods for process improvement. BCG's process improvement assignments are usually quite extensive, often involving five to six consultants over a period of six to 12 months. BCG introduced a concept for process improvement, namely time-based management (TBM) (see Stalk and Hout, 1990) in 1986-87. TBM is based on lessons learned from the Japanese regarding ways in which to achieve quality and speed in both production and product development. With TBM, BCG made an effort to adapt these Japanese principles to Western contexts.

A detailed method for managing TBM projects was introduced for internal use in 1990. It consists of five main phases, each supported by detailed checklists for what has to be done in each phase (see Table II).

In addition to the overall TBM approach, BCG has a large toolbox to support the analysis and implementation of solutions to specific problems. Examples of tools are benchmarking, segmenting, market analysis, pricing policy, etc. In the early phases of TBM, focus is on analytic tools, whereas focus in the later stages shifts to implementation tools.

Views on and use of methods. Even if there exists a detailed method for TBM, BCG maintains that it is not followed in any rigid way. Instead, the need for adaptation to the specific client situation and for creativity is emphasized. The individual consultant's creativity is seen as an especially important factor, which it is essential not to hinder through a detailed method. Consequently, the TBM method is described as a source of inspiration, a basic framework for the change process, from which one can get ideas for handling or avoiding problems.

In providing a basic structure for the change process, methods are also said to create the "slack" necessary for creative thinking. As the elementary problems can be handled by application of the method, intellectual capacity is freed for generating creative solutions of the more advanced problems in the process.

One of BCG's goals when working in a change process is the transfer of methods and tools to the client. Here it is said to be important that these methods are adapted to the specific needs and culture of the client company. The TBM method acts as a basis for developing formalized client-specific methods that can be used by the members of the client company.

Ernst & Young Management Consultants

Methods for process improvement. Ernst & Young Management Consultants (E&Y) in the USA became interested in and started development work in the BPR area at an early stage. A BPR approach was adopted already in 1991, as it was the first management philosophy to give central importance to IT as a business enabler. E&Y had an important role in the development of BPR, as one of the seminal books on the subject was published by an E&Y consultant (see Davenport, 1993). E&Y is still one of the international leaders in the BPR field.

Ernst & Young Sweden has begun working with large process improvement projects only recently. A Nordic adaptation of the international Ernst & Young BPR method, "Navigator", is used to support the work in these assignments. The method has been adapted in collaboration with the Nordic BPR "guru" Björn-Erik Willoch.

This detailed method for conducting BPR projects is meant both for internal E&Y use in consultant-led change processes and to be licensed to clients who want to conduct BPR projects on their own. The licence includes the method, and continuous training and support during its implementation.

The method, which has a modular structure to facilitate adaptation to each project's specific needs, specifies a highly detailed approach to BPR. Its five distinct phases are listed in Table II. Each phase consists of a number of sub-phases, which in its turn consist of activities and tasks. Purpose, procedures, deliverables etc., are described in detail for each activity. Tools to support the work in each phase are also listed and described. The complete method consists of:

- the method on disk/CD-ROM with search and adaptation possibilities;
- examples of work-results;
- "tool sheets" describing concrete tools;
- descriptions of "best practice" applications for processes and enablers;
- an implementation methodology.

E&Y's methods are regularly (twice-yearly) updated in order to reflect the latest experiences and state-of-the-art knowledge.

Views on and use of methods. The methodology plays a central role in E&Y's business, as it is its main product: E&Y sells a method, a certain approach, with

or without consulting support. Adherence to the method in consulting projects is thus seen as a question of quality. In spite of this, methods must be handled with some care as to their adaptation to specific situations.

Knowledge-transfer is an important ingredient in E&Y's concept of change. This is especially true if the client is licensing the methodology. In these cases, the method plays a central role in competence transfer from consultant to client, as it codifies the experience and knowledge of E&Y (even if complemented by training and some consultant support). The method is said to play a major role even in mainly consultant-driven projects, in order to guarantee a consistently high level of quality. The purpose of using the method is said to be primarily to avoid pitfalls rather than to reach excellence. No method is viewed as sufficient in order to reach excellence. Here long-term experience and deep industry knowledge are the more important factors.

For the consultant, especially the less experienced one, the method is said to be an important support. It provides the backbone for the whole change process, giving both the consultant and the client a sense of inner security. By providing shared reference points, the method also supports communication between members in the project team.

Andersen Consulting

Methods for process improvement. Andersen's consulting projects vary significantly in scale and scope – from a few months' for one consultant to five-year projects involving 200 consultants. In practice projects often consist of two parallel and integrated processes – one focusing on the organizational and human side of the change, the other on the technical side or information systems development. Here we will focus mainly on methods for the first type of process.

Methods for the technical aspects of the change process have guided and co-ordinated action within Andersen Consulting for some time. On the human side, on the other hand, the availability of methods has been more limited. Based on the conviction that change processes can be realized in a structured way – that people's reaction to change can be predicted and planned for – Andersen is striving towards more structured approaches to the handling of the human aspects of change.

In order to do this, numerous tools have been developed for specific tasks in the change process, such as designing education programmes, assessing organizational resistance to change, etc. These building blocks are stored in a global tools' database.

The tools are integrated by methods for different kinds of project. Andersen's method for process improvement – value-driven re-engineering – consists of five phases (see Table II), and related sub-phases and activities. Each of these phases is described in detail, with checklists for what data should be collected in order to analyse a certain process, how to present it, etc.

Views on and use of methods. With its roots in IT consulting, Andersen Consulting has a tradition of "method-driven" working. Its "Method One" is said

to have been a thorough, integrated guideline for developing IT systems. Today, the approach to methods is more flexible. It is emphasized that methods have to be chosen and used with judgement, based on the specific client situation. Methods alone do not produce success. Their use must be guided by the consultant's experience.

Methods, nevertheless, are seen as an important support to the consultant running a change process. They provide an overall structure to the change process that can be used by the consultant as a guide. By providing this structure, which of course does not have to be followed exactly, a method also supports the consultant's reflection on the change process, as it provides a checklist of actions that can be included. In this way, methods can lessen the risk of missing vital steps. The method is said also to facilitate the communication between consultant and client, as it provides a structured way of communicating the background and structure of the change process.

ABB MAC

ABB-MAC has its roots in the internal corporate staff of Asea Brown Boweri's Swedish branch. It now operates as a management consulting firm, taking on assignments also from companies other than ABB, even if the latter still is the main client.

Methods for process improvement. Since 1993, the company uses the Rummler & Brache Group (RBG) methodology for its process improvement projects (Rummler and Brache, 1990). ABB is a licensee of the method, and its process management consultants are certified by RBG. In order to become certified, the potential consultant has to attend a course and then, after the course, undertake a project which is scrutinized by RBG.

The RBG methodology is a detailed, step-by-step course of instruction on how to run a process improvement project. It consists of 67 consecutive steps, each defined in terms of time needed, purpose, potential pitfalls, description of actions, roles and responsibilities, and detailed checklists and templates for information gathering. The overall sequence of five phases is given in Table II.

The method's different steps and their deliverables are highly integrated, as the whole method is based on a systems model of the organization. Three system levels are identified and worked with – the organization, process and individual levels. The method's tools are designed in a way that facilitates the crossing of system levels, thus integrating the individual with the process and the process with the organization in order to make them consistent.

Views on and use of methods. An important value basis in the work of ABB-MAC is the involvement and activity of the client. This is the result of a long-term experience of analysis and implementation work gathered together in the ABB T50 programme (a company-wide change programme within ABB Sweden aiming at a leadtime reduction of 50 per cent). The method is said to support such involvement by providing members of the project team with a "map" of the change process. Before any project group starts work, it gets an

introduction to the principles behind the method and to some of the central techniques used, such as process mapping.

The provision of a map of the process which is transparent to members of the project team is said to enhance the possibility of the team actively participating in the process and also to raise members' confidence, as the process follows a well-tested approach. Their knowledge of the "map" also provides the project group members with an awareness that the process continuously advances. This has positive effects on commitment and motivation.

Nonetheless, the method gives support primarily to the consultants in the planning and execution of projects. The method provides a stable backbone for the project and works as a checklist of important activities in both large and small projects. Several consultants said that they consulted the method before each major new step in a project. The support it affords is said to be more important for junior than for more experienced consultants, who often have a more flexible attitude towards the method.

The overall structure of the method is said to be followed in most projects. All the activities are at least considered, even if their elaboration varies between projects, depending on the specific problem situation and the time frame. Short cuts in relation to the method have been tried, but in several cases led to sub-optimal performance. The need for the steps omitted was realized later.

In spite of this, it is emphasized that consultants should have a flexible attitude towards the method, as it has to be adapted to each specific project. The method, though helpful, is not sufficient to achieve success. Some basic consulting skills – especially interpersonal skills – are needed as a basis. The method can thus make a competent consultant better, but will not compensate a consultant lacking in basic skills. The RBG method is also complemented by other tools, such as group dynamic training, especially for handling soft issues. ABB-MAC consultants emphasize that an exaggerated belief in methods might generate a feeling of false security among the consultants. It is important to bear in mind that several success factors are not covered by the method (e.g. social relations).

Observed similarities and differences

The description above indicates that the use of methods in the consulting companies studied shows marked similarities in the area of process improvement, regarding both content and structure, and regardless of the different traditional approaches of each company. This general tendency towards convergence of the services and approaches in the management consulting business was pointed out by Nees and Greiner (1985). Their explanation of the convergence focused on the marketing orientation in the consulting sector:

> The marketing orientation has resulted in the appearance of look-alike consultants who claim to offer a broad range of services. The *analysts* have announced their willingness to become more involved in implementation, the *implementers* have worked hard to publicize their "new concepts", and the *functional specialists* are claiming to be generalists. (Nees and Greiner, 1985, p. 71)

According to Nees and Greiner this trend towards convergence, which is still very much in evidence, is only superficial: "Differences in the values held by professional staff in different [consultancy] firms strongly affect how the client's problem is interpreted and what kinds of recommendations are made" (Nees and Greiner, 1985, p. 69). Thus, differences in the basic conception of the change process (the change culture) are expected to be reflected by differences in action.

What Nees and Greiner (1985) seem to imply is that the convergence has affected only the companies' rhetoric addressed to the market, whereas its practices have remained more or less unchanged. The descriptions above of the companies' use of and attitudes to methods indicate that the convergence trend may well be broader than "rhetoric" implies, possibly embracing even underlying values and practice. The following characteristics in the emerging common ground may be identified.

An holistic view of organizations. An important ingredient in the emerging common value basis of traditionally dissimilar consulting companies is an holistic view of organizations, closely linked to the concept of business processes. Business processes cut cross-functionally through the whole and involve all organizational levels – from top management to the individual worker. Working with business processes involves both strategy, in order to assure the processes' alignment to customer needs, and IT and people, in order to realize maximum efficiency and customer value. This is reflected in the systems models of the organization, which were presented as the bases of Andersen Consulting and E&Y MC's respective approaches. Andersen's underlying model consists of strategy, people, technology and process elements; and E&Y's model, of process, people/organization and technology. System models of this kind are not new (see e.g. Leavitt, 1964; Mumford, 1983), even if the labels for the elements vary. People and technology are included in most models. The process element is new for this generation of models. A closer look at the "older" models reveals that the task element contained in them often is very similar to today's process element. The models integrate the traditional focus of the general management consultants (mostly strategy and organization) with the business processes focus of the IT consultants.

ABB-MAC's view on wholeness differs somewhat from the above, as it focuses not on different systems elements, but on systems levels. Here the company is seen as consisting of three levels – organization, process and individual – all of which have to be considered in a change situation (Rummler and Brache, 1990).

In McKinsey, another aspect of wholeness is stressed. A systems model like the one above is not mentioned explicitly. Instead, focus is set on seeing the company as a "temporal whole", understanding its history, current situation and possible future.

Time as improvement target. The process focus is accompanied by a focus on time as a primary target for improvement measures. This is reflected in the diagnosis of the organization undergoing the actual change. In all the companies studied, time was said to be an important measure when mapping

and diagnosing processes. Reduced cycle times are the goal of most process improvement projects. The consultants pointed out that the advantages of time as a focus for change are that it is easy to measure, unambiguous and has a great effect on a company's bottom line through reduced costs, higher quality, customer value and less capital tied up in the production-cycle. (It is worth mentioning, however, that the existence of simple relations between cycle time, quality, costs etc. has been highly questioned by several researchers (see e.g. Gummesson, 1994).) Most of the consultants interviewed no longer use cost reduction *per se* as a primary argument. Instead, increased customer value is put forward as the main purpose of change.

A focus on learning. The study of the consulting companies revealed also a strong tendency to emphasize the learning of the client in connection with the change process. Traditionally, consultants have had the role of experts in their areas – strategy consultants in analyzing the organization and its environment, IT consultants in designing and building information systems, etc. The interviews with the consultants indicate that this has changed.

The change is manifested in the consultants' emphasis on competence transfer in connection with the change process, and the importance of the participation of the client in all the phases of the change process, which is clearly indicated by the earlier descriptions of the consultancies. The clients' active role in the change process is the vehicle for the transfer of competence (both knowledge and skills) from consultant to client. The involvement of the client is mostly assured through mixed client-consultant project teams, in which these two parties work intimately together with all the tasks in the change process, from data gathering through analysis to implementation.

In several of the projects described, project group members were continuously provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to manage the change process. The knowledge acquired ranged from basic theory about change processes (mentioned by McKinsey) to expertise in relevant functional areas (in an ABB-MAC project, project group members were taught theories for materials' handling and the possibilities provided by computer systems). Knowledge transfer also comprised skills training, such as interviewing skills (McKinsey) and presentation skills (ABB-MAC)

This points towards an extensive use of "on-the-job training" in which the consultants actively participate side-by-side with the client's personnel in the change process, always ready to support and give feedback. Most consultants claimed to see their role more as coach to the client's own personnel than as the expert running the change process.

In addition to a focus on competence transfer from consultant to client, the consultants interviewed also saw it as an important task to facilitate competence transfer within the client organization. The approach used by all the consulting companies studied, is to work in cross-functional teams. The aim is to achieve a shared holistic view of the organization as a basis for the improvement process which often is said to give the participants a markedly increased understanding of the business they are working in.

What has been said here indicates an interesting convergence in the formulation of the goals to be attained in consultants' problem solving, namely reduced cycle time, increased customer value and increased learning in the client company. As indicated in the case descriptions, the convergence among management consulting companies not only includes the content of the change methods, but also their form, which we shall go into in more depth in the next section.

Highly structured methods. The cases described above show that consultants' methods for process improvement are highly structured, and detailed. They identify a number of steps in the change process – up to 67 (ABB-MAC). Each step is described at least in terms of its purpose, content (what the consultant and the client should do) and results (documents, etc.). Often templates for analysis and checklists are provided to support the different steps. These steps also show similarities between the consulting companies with respect to the overall sequence of linking the change initiative to the strategy, defining and mapping processes, identifying and designing improvement possibilities and finally implementing the new processes (see Table II). How can these convergence trends be understood?

Stjernberg (1993) argues that different professions (or different kinds of consultants) have different "change cultures" – different views of the change process, of the important concepts in it and of the tools available and necessary to support it. The characteristics of change cultures are determined by the problems to be solved (e.g. design and implementing of IT systems vs design of a strategy) and the technologies applied in the professional field (e.g. IT vs group dynamic training). However, the change culture similarly will determine which problems are "seen".

Accordingly, it is not surprising that a convergence in the focus of problem solving and change (business processes) results in similar methods for managing change. Differences in constraining technologies also are reduced due to technological development and the increasing importance of IT in all kinds of consulting assignment, which leads to a further convergence of preconditions for the different consultants.

This explains the rationale for convergence in the form of the methods, but it does not answer the question of why convergence is going towards the detailed and structured methods for the change process. Some explanations for this observation will hopefully be generated by a closer look at the functions that methods are seen to fulfil according to their users – the consultants.

The functions of methods in management consulting

As the above study of the changes in the management consulting business indicates, learning today is a central element in consultant-supported change processes. This learning is twofold – the learning of the client during the change process facilitated by the consultant, and the learning that takes place in the consulting company supporting the change process.

The data gathered during the interviews with the consultants give us reason to believe that structured and detailed methods for change play an important role in facilitating this learning. This section will look deeper into this departure from a cognitive frame of reference.

Learning from a cognitive perspective

According to cognitive theory, knowledge is represented and stored in cognitive schemas in which are encoded general properties that are typical of instances of general categories. Schemas are thus generalizations of the properties of a specific class of objects (see e.g. Anderson, 1990). According to Argyris and Schön (1978), learning can be seen as an elaboration of a schema within a given structure (single-loop learning) or a complete change of cognitive schemas (double-loop learning). Piaget makes the distinction between assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1967). This change in schemas is often seen as the result of feedback from action (experiential learning, as discussed e.g. by Kolb, 1984). Especially in an organizational context, experiential learning is the main learning mode referred to (see e.g. Hedberg, 1981; Levitt and March, 1988; March, 1991). Our own point of departure even is that deep elaboration of cognitive structures requires some kind of personal experience.

The functions of methods in the client organization

Facilitation of communication and competence transfer. In terms of the theoretical framework presented above, consultant and client must be expected to have quite different schemas of the change process at the beginning of the project. The schemas will differ both in content and in elaboration. As the consultant normally has considerable experience of change processes in different kinds of setting, his/her schema of the change process should be quite detailed and elaborate. The client, on the other hand, normally has less experience of change processes and therefore a less detailed and elaborate schema. The challenge for the consultant is thus to transfer as much as possible of his/her cognitive schema (experience) and to support the elaboration of the client's new schema by giving him/her the opportunity to extend his/her own experiences.

The transfer of the consultant's schema of the change process is supported by his/her method, because this can be seen as a (greatly simplified) representation of his cognitive map about change. Normally, methods are not the result of a single consultant's experience, but of the combined experience of consultants in a whole company. As those methods are shared by the consultants, the point still holds. The method defines what constitutes a good company, which variables are possible to manipulate in order to become a good company, which tools are available to support the change, etc. (Hatchuel and Weil, 1995). The transfer of a detailed method is thus a first step in the transfer of knowledge to the client.

A second important step according to the theoretical framework is the elaboration through experience of the client's schema. This requires the client's

active participation in the change process. As mentioned above, this participation is sought by all the companies studied by making consultant and client work closely together in the change process. Even here – in supporting the client's action, and the consultant-client interaction – consultants identify a potentially important role for methods.

Collaborative action requires that the collaborators have some common view on what to achieve and how to achieve it. Weick (1979) argued that agreement on means is sufficient. There is a need for at least partly shared schemas and a common language for communication. Formalized methods for change provide both an easily communicated schema of the change process and a set of defined notions which support the communication in connection with the process.

Facilitation of collaboration and co-ordinated action within the client company. This role for methods of providing a common schema for the change process affects not only consultant-client interaction: consultants also acknowledge a role for methods in supporting the interaction within the client company. As already mentioned, many change projects today are cross-functional. Consequently the change process requires the collaboration of people from a number of different divisions, functions, subsidiaries, etc. All these people have different schemas of the organization and the change process. Methods thus can be seen as providing a starting-point for articulating differences between these schemas and, ultimately, for the creation of a shared schema among the people working with the change process. Such a shared schema, or at least an awareness about the differences between the schemas of different groups, is essential for co-ordinated action, as it ensures some coherence in the interpretation of common data and thereby creates some predictability in an otherwise complex situation (as discussed by e.g. Björkegren, 1989). Several of the consultants interviewed mentioned that, as a "neutral" approach, the method could have such a role of bridging different organizational, functional or professional sub-cultures in order to produce unified action, as well as challenging people's traditional ways of thinking.

Functions internal to the consulting business

The interviews with the consultants indicate that methods are seen to play a role not only in the consultant-client interaction, but also in the internal affairs of consulting companies. The added value for a consultant of working with a consulting company rather than on his/her own is at least twofold:

(1) The first potential advantage for consultants joining a company, rather than working on their own, is the access to the accumulated experience of a large number of consultants. A single consultant can benefit from the continuous learning of hundreds of consultants in a consulting company.

(2) A second advantage is the access to highly specialized knowledge in a number of different areas which can easily be integrated with the various projects.

The above advantages are not self-realizing, but have to be consciously organized by the company. The individual's knowledge has to be made common knowledge, and forms have to be found in which project teams are assembled in accordance with the expertise needed, and without regard to nationality, earlier experience of working together with the same people, etc. Methods support the realization of advantages in both these areas.

Cognitive support to the consultant. The individual consultant faces unstructured and complex situations where neither the problems nor the solutions are apparent. The development work may require creativity and innovation as well as a deep understanding of the technology and the business processes. A methodology offers a framework within which the creative processes may take place. It can provide a methodical, consistent and self-evaluating guide, which ensures that important steps in the change process are identified, and which creates some "cognitive slack" to support creativity.

Methods should not be used rigidly, however, but rather adapted to the specific situation – something which is pointed out by all consultants. Adaptations to the situation and as the result of creativity are essential for success. The rigid usage of a method may well be a risk, as the types of solution feasible or relevant may well be embedded in the methodology (Docherty and Dilschmann, 1992). The constant use of a specific methodology thus may result in negative learning in terms of reduced creativity and routine problem-solving behaviour. Cooley (1980) reported that British companies' recruitment of design engineers was directed primarily towards the evaluation of the methods and tools that they had used in their work and the duration of their use. The creative ability of designers was regarded as probably stunted if they had used certain methods or tools for too many years.

Thus, each individual method's function as a conceptual tool for the consultant must be balanced by the ability of the consultant to choose from a rich repertoire of alternative approaches, methods and tools.

Organizational memory. One way of making communal individual experiences is to let those individuals update a common method. This method can be seen as a form of organizational memory, representing the company's state-of-the-art practice. This function for methods is clearly illustrated by E&Y's approach of periodically updating its methods with the latest experiences from completed projects. Similar approaches were used by the other companies, where suggestions for improvements of the method were continuously collected from all over the world, and the development in the environment was monitored by "competence centres" responsible for the development and maintenance of the method. The updating of the method can thus be seen as a clear manifestation of organizational learning. The existence and use of a formalized method for change is an important vehicle for continuous organizational learning in large consulting companies.

Facilitation of exchange of experience. The role of methods in providing a common schema for the change process and a common language for communicating it is important even in the consulting company. All exchange of

experience does not pass by the method, but much of the individual learning is the result of discussions between peers about projects. In these discussions the concepts used in the methods – different steps, documents, etc. – were widely used according to ABB-MAC and E&Y consultants. In particular, the different steps of the method provided a basic structure in the discussions about particular change processes.

Flexible staffing. The second advantage of working in a consulting company mentioned above was access to a large number of experts. In order to make effective use of these experts, common schemas (methods) of the change process in the company as a whole are important, as they provide the flexibility necessary in the creation of teams. As collaborative work requires common schemas, at least to some degree, the existence of a "company schema" makes it possible to get new teams functional in a short time. A common language and way of thinking about the change process greatly facilitates communication and unified action. This function of methods was especially emphasized by the largest multinational companies, where project groups often are staffed with people from all over the world.

Conclusions

The main question in this paper has been: What are the functions of structured methods in the reorganization and rationalization of major business processes? We have also asked: To what extent, and how, do major consulting firms use structured methods in these kinds of projects? Are the methods themselves important, or is it rather the experience of the individual consultant that determines the success of the consulting process?

Our study is based on the consultants' own perception of the projects they have been involved in – we have not so far been able to collect independent data about the projects or about the degree of success in these.

An important conclusion from the interviews in the five offices of major management consulting firms operating in Sweden is that the structured methods play an important role in providing a common interface to the change process. This has been shown to be true for the consulting company, the client company and for the consultant-client interaction.

In the consulting company the shared interface is important to support the exchange of experience and the flexibility in staffing necessary to realize the value added by the organizational level of the consulting firm as compared to the single consultant. The methods are thus part of a more general institutionalization of competence, which has the double function of facilitating the introduction and socialization of newly recruited consultants and of increasing the organizational (in contrast to the individual consultant's) component in the "product" sold to the client, thus binding the consultant to the company. It is simply impossible for the individual consultant to develop and store as an individual the experience accessible in the institutionalized "organizational memory".

In the consultant-client interaction the shared interface facilitates competence transfer and learning by providing an easily transferred version of a part of the consultant's knowledge as well as facilitating experiential learning through active participation in the change process. In a similar way, the common interface provided by methods in the client company, facilitates the surfacing and bridging of differences in views between project group members.

This is largely a cognitive co-ordination, facilitating the communication between the consultant and the client system, as well as between the different consultants and between the different actors within the client system. We will elaborate that conclusion below.

Convergence of problems and methods

The study of five consulting companies, with diverse backgrounds in regard to focused problems, used technologies, typical clients, etc., indicates a convergence of both the problem focused on by the consultants and the use of methods. The problems that were approached converge towards focusing on the organization as a whole, creating systems-wide changes in the major business processes, and using time as a major operational target for these changes.

There is also a convergence in the approach to the change process, where the involvement of the client is heavily emphasized both as a way of creating ownership, and for creating learning processes in the client company. The structured methods play an important role in this involvement of the client system.

Another way of expressing this observation is that the problem itself, rather than the traditional emphasis of the consulting firm, tends to guide the approach to the consulting process. Since we have focused on one type of projects, i.e., process improvement projects, we have found that the similarities between the firms in the approach to these types of projects are striking, in spite of their differing traditional backgrounds.

Ownership and competence development

The involvement of the client system in the consulting process has been emphasized by all consultants. The factors driving this involvement are the importance of the client's ownership of the results, and an emphasis on the competence development in the client system in order to attain viable results and self-sustaining development processes and diffusion (Altier, 1988; Poulfelt and Payne, 1994).

The traditional argument in the consulting literature for client participation has been that ownership is a prerequisite for the acceptance of the results of the consultant intervention. Participation in the change process transfers this ownership to the client, with easier implementation as a result (see e.g. Altier, 1988; Metzger, 1988; Overholt and Altier, 1988). A second argument, often missing or quite hidden in many earlier articles, is that the outcome of the intervention should be measured not only in terms of the content of the changes but also in terms of the competence development in the client system as a result

of the change process. The client's learning can be valuable in both the short term – the consultant's involvement may be phased out earlier – and in the long term – the quality and intensity of new projects without consultant coaching, will be higher. Several of the consultants interviewed emphasize the learning argument as the strongest for involving expensive consultants in often time-consuming implementation work. Turner (1988) supports this observation:

> The emphasis of consulting has changed from "solving problems" to building clients' capacity for diagnosing situations on their own and thus managing more effectively…Increasingly, management consultants are worth their fees not only because of their ability to analyse client problems and provide sound recommendations, but also because of their skill in conducting a human process that facilitates needed learning and change. It is process skill that makes analytical ability valuable (p. 12).

The same view is presented by Chenault (1989), who sees enabling the client's members to learn as the vital skill of the future consultant. He predicts that the costs of consultants will be measured increasingly against the learning which has taken place in the client organization as a result of the change process. As pointed out in several of our interviews, it would not be possible to see the consultant's involvement in implementation as a profitable investment unless the learning of the client system is attributed a high value.

Structured methods for facilitating cognitive co-ordination

The systems wide characteristics of the changes we have focused put heavy demands on the consultants' cognitive capacity and the communication in connection with the change process (Consultant-client, client-client, consultant-consultant). Structured methods economize the cognitive resources and support communication between the actors.

The convergence of problems and methods used by the different consulting firms is closely linked to the increasing emphasis given to competence development. However, the positive effects of structured methods on learning are not self-evident. Detailed methods also may support uncritical action, based on an oversimplified view of management and organizations. McGill (in Furusten, 1995) states that:

> Mythical quick fixes, which predominate in the modern society, do not correspond with the reality which surrounds managers and therefore obstruct the understanding of the real complexities of management (p. 14)

It could be argued also that the methods create a feeling among their users of security, which actually counteracts reflection, and thereby learning. Thus, detailed and structured methods may well hinder competence development instead of supporting it, as claimed above.

This indicates that an important determinant of the methods' effects on learning in consulting projects is the user's approach to the method. Viewing methods as a workable "how-to" guide to the change process might produce the above-mentioned negative effects. Viewing them, on the other hand, as a set of concepts, facilitating communication and requiring adaptation to each specific

situation, might produce more positive effects by opening up discussion and reflection about the match of the concepts provided by the method and the reality to which they are to be applied (Hatchuel and Weil, 1995).

According to this argument, it is in the process of "translating" a method's abstract concepts (e.g. "lead time") to a specific situation ("which is the lead time in *this* specific production process?") that learning takes place. This process of translation leads to the posing of new questions to the client organization as well as to the method. Efforts to answer these questions result in enlightening discussions about the character and idiosyncrasies of the client organization, emphasizing aspects of it unnoticed earlier. By the same means, the need for adaptation of the method leads also to a continuous reflection on and development of the method in the consulting company. It is thus the consultants' view of the method as a common interface to the change process, a set of concepts in need of adaptation, rather than as a "recipe" for "how to do it", that enables abstract and simplified methods to facilitate learning in highly complex, idiosyncratic situations.

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