

Working as a school consultant...

School consultants are in a unique position to support and assist schools to deal with the complexities of curriculum change, school development, and the ever-changing relationships between schools and the wider community. The work of school consultants requires sound knowledge of the education system as well as an ability to work at all levels of the system.

But it also demands much more than this.

Working with a range of schools from a position outside the school requires more than a working knowledge of current curriculum reform. Consultants need to be able to win and maintain the trust of a wide range of people in a range of different schools and at times quite difficult school cultures. They need to be able to influence the way people think about their work, without being there on a daily basis. They need to be able to transfer knowledge and skills in a way which strengthens, rather than diminishes individuals', teams' and schools' capacities for undertaking their own self-evaluation, planning and improvement.

Navigating a course through these varied and shifting school situations requires a special range of skills for school consultants. Perhaps the most important of these is the development of the habit of reflection – being able to reflect on their own work. This does not happen just because the consultant is a caring person or a good motivator.

To fully develop the skill of critical reflection, school consultants need a theoretical framework for their work which gives their own actions meaning and coherence, and which gives them a way of thinking critically and analytically about the service they are providing.

A valuable theoretical framework will enable school consultants to effectively:

- contract roles and tasks with schools
- learn to observe schools as social organisations
- provide productive feedback to schools as a 'critical friend'
- take on and move between the quite different roles of group facilitator, trainer, consultant, teacher, mentor and coach

The underlying skill required to successfully carry out these tasks is the school consultant's ability to be a skillful process manager – that is,

someone who does not rely simply on information–power for credibility, but whose work focuses and builds on the way people in schools manage the process of their own change and development.

Process management skills are best learned through a combination of insight, experience and practice.

Optimal learning of these process skills can be gained by:

- observation of and de–briefing with experienced practitioners in a range of situations
- supervised practice in the consulting role
- regular, facilitated, critical reflection on experience, both personal and collegial
- study of critical readings
- trials of appropriate models and tools for working with schools

An information–oriented workshop or one–off conference presentation on ‘school consulting’, no matter how insightful or practical, cannot provide consultants with the process learning they need if they are to be effective external facilitators.

Contemporary research shows that an action learning approach is highly effective in developing process skills. Action learning enables consultants to develop their practice knowledge, through repeated cycles of action and critical reflection, with the aid of a collegial group and professional facilitation.

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