BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HUMBLE INQUIRY*

EDGAR H. SCHEIN

HUMBLE CONSULTING

HOW TO PROVIDE REAL HELP FASTER

Contents

Preface

This book brings together various insights and ideas I have acquired over fifty years of research, teaching, and consulting and, at the same time, reflects how the kinds of problems that organizations face in our rapidly changing world have forced the evolution of those ideas.

As I began my career as a human relations trainer and part-time consultant in the 1960s, I evolved the model of Process Consultation (introduced in my books *Process Consultation*, 1969; and *Process Consultation Revisited*, 1999), which emphasizes the need to involve the client in the process of figuring out what is wrong and what can be done about it. After several decades of working with this model and updating the book, I began to realize that the model we were using for organization and management consulting really had broader applications to all kinds of helping relationships, resulting in the 2009 book *Helping*. Analyzing the helping process from a sociological point of view also revealed how much our cultural norms influenced what we thought should be both the client's role and the consultant's role in the helping process.

In my own experience as a helper, it seemed crucial that the client really be able to tell what is bothering him or her and be able to be open and trusting in doing so. I then discovered that the major inhibiting factor to clients' being open and trusting is the cultural force in the United States toward *telling* as being the heroic model, which led helping and consulting models to be structured in terms of the formal professional stages of *diagnose* and then *tell as recommendations*. My management consulting friends told me that "this is required if you are really doing your job," which, to my dismay, I found many clients passively believed.

I recognized that the obsession with *telling* was a broader characteristic of the US managerial culture, which led me to write the book *Humble Inquiry* (2013) to point out how much potential harm was done in making subordinates feel psychologically unsafe in *upward reporting* if they saw safety or quality issues in how work was getting done.

In my own consulting efforts, I found that telling did not work and, furthermore, that the clients who called me in for consultation often had previously experienced the formal approach with other consultants and did not find the *diagnose and then recommend* approach terribly helpful. The formal process often missed the real problem or recommended things that could not be implemented for a variety of reasons that the consultant evidently had not considered.

At the same time, the problems that confronted leaders and managers became more complex to diagnose and even more difficult to “fix.” I also learned through several experiences that will be discussed in the cases in this book that sometimes just the earliest questions, comments, and puzzlements that I expressed in the *initial* contacts with a client proved to be very helpful in enabling the client to perceive and think about the situation. This often led to immediate next moves that the client could think of that were seen by both helper and client as immediately beneficial.

All this led me to go beyond the previous models and write about what I experienced—real help can be fast, but it requires an open, trusting relationship with the client that the helper has to build from the very beginning. Because of the difficulty and complexity of the problems, and because the client’s own view of what is going on is so important in the relationship, this also requires a great deal of humility in the consultant. So in this book I will describe the new kinds of problems, the new consultant–client relationship that will have to be built, and the new kinds of attitudes and behaviors that consultants will have to learn in order to be really helpful.

I think of this as an evolution in my thinking. Many of these ideas may have been implicit in earlier works, but they are only now coming into consciousness both as insights and as new principles of what has to happen if we really want to help on complex, dynamic “messy” problems and if we want to do it fast because, in many cases, clients need to do something adaptive right away.

Where Does This Fit into a Larger Historical Context?

Humble Consulting draws on elements of many prior models that deal with complexity, interdependence, diversity, and instability. Almost every theory of helping refers to the concept of *relationship*, but few of them talk about *levels* of relationships and what is involved in negotiating them. One exception is Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U* (2007), in which he explicitly differentiates levels of conversation in his analysis of how to reach the deepest level within ourselves and in our relationships to find the true sources of innovation.

The theories and models that are most relevant to understanding these kinds of problems and developing workable *next moves* were initially best articulated in the study of highly reliable organizations by Karl Weick with his concepts of "loose coupling," "sense making," "embracing errors," and "resilience" (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). On the sociological side, I have always found Erving Goffman's analysis of interaction and "situational proprieties" to be an essential model for understanding how relationships are formed, maintained, and repaired when damaged (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967).

Closely related are the systemic models of "organizational learning" (e.g., Senge, 1990) and family therapy (e.g., Madanes, 1981). The work on "mindfulness" (Langer, 1997) is crucial in what I see to be the new skills that will be needed. The change programs that rely on so-called lean methods, based on the work of Deming and Juran that evolved into the Toyota Production System, are relevant if they are well executed and involve the employees who actually do the work (Plsek, 2014). Open sociotechnical systems approaches to problem identification and solution as evolved by the Tavistock Clinic have provided much more helpful ideas than standardized methods of measurement, analysis, and problem solving.

Perhaps most relevant of all is what Bushe and Marshak (2015) have identified in the last decade as "*dialogic* organization development," as contrasted with "*diagnostic* organization development," in highlighting what leadership theorists like Heifetz (1994) also emphasize—that the complex problems of today are not technical ones that can be solved with specific tools. The best we can do is to find workable responses or what I am calling here "adaptive moves." This will involve new kinds of conversations of a more dialogic, open-ended variety. The emphasis on the concept of "moves" is important in this context because it implies action without necessarily having a plan or solution in mind.

In the end I fall back on much of my learning in running sensitivity training groups in human relations labs for the National Training Labs in Bethel, Maine, where the key operational concept was "spirit of inquiry" and accepting that we did not always know where our learning process would take us (Schein and Bennis, 1965). Building a relationship that enables the client to "learn how to learn" was then and becomes now more than ever one of the crucial goals of Humble Consulting.

The spirit of inquiry is best exemplified nowadays in the concept of "dialogue" as propounded by Bill Isaacs (1999) and in Barrett's hugely insightful book *Yes to the Mess* (2012), which shows us brilliantly how the skills of improvisation as exhibited in the jazz combo provide some of the most important clues as to what helpers and leaders will have to be able to do in the future.

How the Book Is Organized

Chapter 1 lays out the basic problem—the complex messy problems of today and the future require a new model of helping, coaching, and consultation. Chapter 2 lays out the new elements or components of the model of Humble Consulting. The following chapters then explain and exemplify each of those components. Chapter 3 explains the concept of a Level Two relationship. Chapter 4 shows how that relationship has to be built from the moment of first contact with the client by adopting a certain attitude that hinges on maximizing curiosity. Chapter 5 explores the whole concept of *personalization* as key to the new consulting model. Chapter 6 highlights that the consulting is almost always more helpful on the *processes* that occur between client and consultant as they explore how to make adaptive moves. Chapter 7 then explores the concept of *adaptive moves* in more detail and in terms of the innovations that are required to make them helpful. The book closes with some conclusions and challenges for the future.

ONE
I Am the Consultant, and I Don’t Know What to Do!

I have had a monthly lunch meeting with a group of senior executives and doctors from a large hospital and medical school that are both part of a large academic medical complex. We meet to see how the hospital and medical school can further improve the quality of medical care, patient and employee safety, patient experiences in the hospital, research breakthroughs, and medical education. I have learned that the doctor community includes clinicians, researchers, and teachers who have different ultimate agendas, yet they have to coordinate their efforts and are all dependent on the same sources of financial support from the hospital and the university.

The hospital is the primary source of income for the medical school and for some of the research. The administrators, who may or may not be doctors, have to apportion funds between the needs of research, clinical practice, safety, maintenance, expansion of the delivery system in the community, and a reserve for future building projects. The doctors are all employed by the medical school, but if they are clinicians in the hospital, they also report to the hospital administrators. The senior administrators are working hard at getting everyone on the same page while recognizing that the goals of research, education, and clinical practice are to some degree different, that the individuals pursuing these goals have different personal agendas, and that their leaders are protective of those goals and agendas.

I have been invited to join this group because of my work on organizational culture, my experience as a process consultant, and my growing interest in health care and hospital administration. Over the past several years, I have also met other hospital administrators as part of a small think tank and have learned that this set of problems is shockingly common in large university-based medical centers.

As I approach tomorrow’s lunch, I realize that I don’t know what to do!

My Reflection on This Situation

Over my many years of consulting, I have from time to time found that being the expert and providing information and/or advice works, but only for simple, bounded problems. I have also played "doctor" to organizational clients by doing diagnoses and delivering recommendations. That has worked only occasionally, when I happened to have enough insider information about the organization's identity, mission, and cultural DNA to be able to make suggestions that would be implementable.

I learned early on to be what I called a "process consultant," someone who would help a group in the organization do more effectively what it needed to do in terms of its basic function and mission. That usually involved getting into a relationship with the client that would enable us to figure out together what was wrong and how to fix it. But that process also failed if the problem was complex, culturally multifaceted, and constantly changing. To deal with my medical lunch group, I needed yet another way to think about how to be helpful in the face of such complexity and rapid change.

I then thought about the implications of a case that happened a few years ago that I call "my most successful consultation on the perplexing problem of how to change culture."

CASE 1. Culture Change in Beta Power Company

Potential client on the phone: *Hello, Dr. Schein, this is Sue Jones from the Beta Power Company. I am the head of HR and Management Development. Our new CEO asked me to call you to find out if you would be willing to come and help us change what we have discovered to be a rigid, stodgy formal culture. It is hard to get any new programs going because we keep running into these old traditions and ways of doing things. Would you come visit our company to learn more and help us launch some culture change programs?*

(As I listened to this proposal and question, I sensed two main reactions in me. First, it sounded interesting and was certainly within the range of the types of projects that I felt I could tackle successfully. But, second, I recalled having had some bad experiences visiting organizations without knowing more, and especially without knowing what the new CEO actually had in mind in what he called "a rigid, stodgy culture." I also wanted a little more information about the motivation of the CEO. Was he just going to have Sue Jones do this? Or would he involve himself, which would be crucial if culture change was to happen. These thoughts led to the following conversation, which I call *personalization*.)

Ed S.: *That sounds interesting and could be complicated. I think it might be important to talk about this with the CEO away from the company to explore what is going on and what he has in mind. Do you think he would be willing to talk with me separately and maybe visit me in Cambridge?*

(This response was the first of what I call *adaptive moves* to begin to build a more personal relationship with the client to find out what is really on his mind.)

S. J.: *You are right that we maybe need to talk this through away from the company, so let me explore with him the possibility of coming to see you. I'll get back in touch.*

(A week later.)

S. J.: *I spoke to our CEO, and he was quite enthusiastic about coming to visit you. He will bring his new COO as well, and I will be accompanying them. So when can we set a date for a half-day meeting?*

Ed S.: *Here are some dates to check out. Also, I presume it is understood that I will be billing you for this half day*.

(I had learned from other experiences that sometimes the best help occurs in the early meetings, so I would bill for those early meetings unless it was clearly a short exploratory phone call, lunch, or visit.)

S. J.: *That sounds good. We will let you know which date*.

(We met two weeks later in the garden at my house at 9 a.m. I chose to meet at my house to provide a setting that could involve food and drinks, and was therefore an invitation to personalize the situation.)

Ed S.: *Welcome! Let's talk about what is on your mind about this "rigid, stodgy culture."*

CEO: *OK, Ed. May I call you Ed?*

Ed S.: *Sure*.

CEO: *When John* [the COO] *and I began to try to implement some new programs in the company, we kept finding old habits and traditions that people seemed to want to hold on to, like the culture has kind of fossilized.*

Ed S.: *Can you give me an example?*

> (This is almost always a good thing to ask because at this point I have no idea at all what they are talking about, what their concept of culture is, or what is actually bothering them. No sooner had I asked this than John sat up in his chair and jumped into the conversation with great intensity.)

COO: *Yes, Ed, I can give you a great example that just happened yesterday. I have a staff group of about fifteen people with whom I meet regularly in this big conference room, and they always sit in the same seats. Okay, so yesterday we met, and there were only five of them there, and they again sat in those same seats,* ***even though that meant they were scattered all over the room!***

> (John looked at me expectantly, opened his hands in a gesture of "see what I am up against," and paused. At this moment I was overwhelmed by my curiosity and impulsively gave in to it without considering the possible consequences. Ask yourself what you might have done at this moment.)

Ed S. (with intensity): ***What did you do?***

COO: ***My god, I didn't do anything . . .***

> (There was a long pause during which I think the CEO, the COO, and Sue all had the same insight. Here we had the top two executives of the organization complaining about stodgy subordinate behavior and asking an outsider to help them "change the culture." Somehow it had not occurred to them that their passivity was tacitly condoning the "cultural behavior" they were complaining about. I was reminded of the sage comment "You get what you settle for.")

We spent the rest of the morning listing all the actions that they could take that would send a clear signal to the organization that behavioral changes had to be made. I referred them to my *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (4th ed., 2010) in which a whole chapter discusses how executives can influence culture. At this point I felt quite comfortable playing "doctor" and recommending something. We agreed that the only further thing I should do is to check in with them every few weeks by phone to see how things were going. The CEO called me regularly over the next few months and occasionally sent me e-mails describing actions he was thinking about to get my reactions. I billed him for my time spent and provided further suggestions as needed. I did not visit or launch any formal culture projects. None were needed. I had helped them see how they could manage the culture change perfectly well on their own.

LESSONS

- The help that they got was not connected in any **logical** way to what I had done. There was no diagnosis, no analysis, no prescription. I had no idea that my impulsive question would reframe their problem as one that they could deal with themselves. I had resisted various diagnostic questions such as “How did you feel about that,” or “Why do you think they always sat in their same seats,” and instead I had **given in to my curiosity.** They were delighted to have a way of moving forward that did not involve a complicated diagnostic period followed by a complicated change program. The real problem was not the stodgy culture but their own behavioral paralysis; the presented problem might have taken months to unravel, while the real problem led to an immediate adaptive move.

- My important “intervention” was to invite them to my house and ask them to “give me an example,” to personalize and get a more specific sense of what was going on. What was driving me was a mixture of curiosity and commitment to being helpful.

- Focusing directly on “culture” did not seem to lead anywhere, whereas focusing on their own behavior revealed what the client actually wanted to accomplish. They did not want to know about their culture. They wanted to **change** it. A culture analysis would have been a waste of time and possibly would have distracted them from steps that they could take immediately to solve the problem that motivated them to come to a consultant in the first place.

The Paradox of Messy Complexity and Fast Help

This case taught me that *help can happen fast*. But you need to find out what is really on the client’s mind and honor your own curiosity. Complex messes like the one at the university-based medical school and hospital did not lend themselves to such fast help but did illustrate that adaptive moves could be helpful. My experience with similar messes occurred in a variety of organizations with which I've had long-term relationships. In those cases, as in the problems I am encountering with clients now, the mess only emerges as initial moves are made that reveal deeper layers of issues and concerns. For example,

- I worked with Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) on and off for thirty years, which involved primarily helping the founder Ken Olsen deal with whatever was on his mind and working with various members of senior management as I got drawn into the daily operations of this organization. Some help happened very fast, as we will see, and, sadly, some needed help was never provided.

- For more than ten years I worked with ConEdison, the utility that supplies the greater New York area with electric power, gas, and steam. They are operating an old system that requires careful and continuous maintenance to avoid accidents that can be deadly to the public and to their own employees. They are also responsible for maintaining a clean and safe environment under conditions of changing seasons and changing weather. I worked with senior management and the vice president of Health, Environment, and Safety to help them maintain safety in a complex, unionized, highly technical environment in which limited resources were fought over for much-needed maintenance and new improvements while the public, the regulators, and the environmental watchdogs totally mistrusted the company's efforts because of events a decade or more earlier. A similar scenario is playing out in Pacific Gas and Electric, with similar levels of complexity.

- I encountered closely related problems in my five years of working with INPO (the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations) as part of an advisory board to help that organization in its mission of assessing and aiding the 104 individual nuclear plants operating in the United States. INPO had the problem of how to help plants maintain an absolutely safe environment under different technological, economic, and political conditions because the power companies had complex sites that included coal-fired and nuclear plants. The nuclear plants experienced rapidly changing technology while they were losing technical talent as the alumni of Admiral Rickover's nuclear submarine organization retired. Nuclear safety is highly regulated, which creates the paradoxical reality that the enforcement of legal, technical, and bureaucratic standards often gets in the way of building the open and trusting relationships that are needed and always mentioned as integral to "safety culture."

- I worked for five years with the Swiss-German chemical company

Ciba-Geigy. In working on various strategic and operational issues, I learned some powerful lessons about organizational and national culture and saw many complex messes, some of which were ultimately resolved by the merger of Ciba-Geigy with Sandoz into what is today Novartis. One messy problem that occurred in this and in another pharmaceutical company was the tension between basic research on the origins of disease and applied research on developing pharmaceuticals that cure or at least alleviate the symptoms. Aligning basic research on the causes of diseases with applied research on curative drugs under different sets of rules in different countries leads to value differences on what is "good research" that can be trusted when done in different countries. Can basic researchers, applied researchers, practitioners, and administrators find common goals and work together, or are the occupational differences culturally too diverse?

- I was a board member of Massachusetts Audubon Society, the major land conservation and environmental steward in New England. Some of the most interesting helping challenges in my six years there occurred when fundamental strategic questions interacted with the constraints of local community values, legal issues, lack of funds, and limitations of what the organization could actually accomplish. For example, should they support the building of windmills in the waters around Cape Cod, given that this was good for energy conservation but potentially bad for birds and fish?

Current problems that have been brought to me reflect growing complexity around coordination between silos, between functions, and between cultural units. For example, a CEO wants a better process for hiring researchers to overcome the following "problem": while the principal investigators are still waiting for the grant money, they are pressuring the human resources function to begin to advertise for the needed research jobs, leading to promises of employment that occasionally cannot be honored because the research money did not come through, resulting in both embarrassment and lawsuits.

A hospital system that has units all over the country wants to standardize certain medical processes, only to discover great resistance from several regional units that have developed strong cultures of their own and believe that their local processes are better.

A successful theater company specializing in Shakespeare finds its market shifting because of the audience's desire for more contemporary productions while, at the same time, it is running out of money. The presenting problem is that the management neither wants to nor knows how to innovate.

What I am trying to convey in these examples is the complexity and ambiguity of figuring out what to do if we are asked to help.

Sometimes the best and fastest help will be to enable the client to understand that very complexity and recognize that small adaptive moves will have to replace big diagnoses and interventions.

Why Are Problems Messier These Days?

As I reflect on this question, several forces acting together seem to be involved:

1. All the technical fields that have to collaborate have themselves become *more complex*. What this means is that the specialists working in those fields are more likely to create an occupational culture to distinguish themselves and get more benefits for their specialty.

2. The groups that have to interact and collaborate are not only more *occupationally diverse* but they now often include national cultures that have different languages and different assumptions about how things are and how things are supposed to be.

3. Greater occupational and national diversity within a given organization makes goal congruence more difficult to achieve. We all agree that the easiest way to "solve" these problems is to get everyone on the same page, bring all the "chiefs" together in the same room, and get them to agree on a single goal that everyone can relate to and support. Unfortunately, getting the right people in the same room is usually the hardest part of this pseudosolution, and, even if we do, there is no guarantee that they will want to reach any kind of consensus because of deep differences in tacit cultural assumptions and goals. All the wonderful organization development processes that we advocate, like team building, scenario planning, future search, appreciative inquiry, lean production systems, and rapid prototyping, tend to assume that the people who have to agree to coordinate can be gotten to even talk to one another, much less agree on anything.

4. There isn't enough time, or at least we perceive that there isn't. Things are moving too fast to build trusting relationships, to get to know one another, to even eat together or have fun together. Getting two cultures to interact takes time. Getting three or more to interact takes more time. Speeding up processes such as going to one of the many models of rapid prototyping might work if we have figured out which process to prototype and gotten people into them that can communicate with one another. All too often we prototype the wrong process.

5. The problems that have to be addressed are not stable. The two things that are new and different about these kinds of problems is that they do not have a technical solution, and they are deeply intertwined with fundamental strategic and structural issues *in an unstable environment*. In an unstable environment, when an organization attempts to make sense of a given situation at time 1, any interventions produce unknown effects that change the nature of the problem at time 2 and require brand-new sense-making efforts.

6. Finally, the concept of *client* will change as well in that the various individuals or groups with whom I am talking see themselves as part of a system rather than as individual clients. I may be coaching an individual executive in a key role, but it becomes immediately clear that what worries her has implications for others in the organization so that the problem formulation has to be systemic and that whatever adaptive moves are considered have to take into account the systemic consequences which, paradoxically, may be unknown.

The Need for a New Model

We are dealing with new complex problems, new kinds of client systems, and a new sense of urgency in our clients. We therefore need a new consulting model—Humble Consulting (HC). This model will tell you what attitude to strike with your clients, how to respond to their very first inquiry, and will help you to accept that initially you might not know what to do. HC is a totally different way of relating to your clients. HC presumes that you are *committed* to being helpful, bring a great deal of honest *curiosity*, and have the right *caring* attitude, a willingness to find out what is really on the client's mind.

You will then approach your first contact with that potential client with the intention of building an open and trusting relationship, and you will know that this more personal relationship will lead not only to finding out what is really on the client's mind but also to discovering whether you can help in the traditional expert or doctor role. And, paradoxically, you will discover that the relationship-building process itself leads you to behavior that the client may find immediately helpful. What you decide to do, how you will react, will *not* be big diagnoses or interventions but small adaptive moves.

The essence of that relationship-building process will be to get past the formality of *professional distance*. Either you or the client will have to personalize the process by asking a personal question or revealing something personal. You will have to make yourself somewhat vulnerable. What exactly you will ask or reveal will depend on the situation and who the parties are, but commitment, curiosity, and caring will guide you.

Humble Consulting is new in several respects. In the next chapter, we look at this in more detail.

TWO
What Is New in Humble Consulting?

The Humble Consulting model is new in several respects. In this chapter I will review the elements of this new model briefly. The rest of the book examines each new element in greater detail with the aid of illustrative case examples from my own experience. I refer mostly to *consulting*, but the ideas apply as well to other forms of helping such as coaching, counseling, and broader organization development projects.

HC Requires a New Kind of Personal Relationship with the Client

I said early on that the consultant should have a "relationship" with the client, but I never specified what I meant by that or what kind of relationship it should be. In working on messier problems and trying to get at what is really on the client's mind and what is worrying him, I have found that the formal professional relationship that most models advocate will not get me there. I have to overcome "professional distance" and develop what I am calling a "Level Two relationship" that is more personal, more trusting, and more open.

In my book *Helping* (2009), I noted that asking for help is itself difficult in our culture, so potential clients feel "one down" and therefore not very open or trusting in their initial contact with the consultant. In the new role, the consultant must find a way to begin the personalization process from the very first encounter with the client to signal that she can be trusted and that it is safe to be more open with her. What I mean by "relationship" and Level Two will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

The building of such a relationship begins from the moment of the first encounter, which means that the consultant must approach that initial encounter with an entirely different kind of initial behavior.

HC Requires a New Kind of Behavior in the Very First Contact

No matter what the client's initial presentation might be, building the new relationship requires that I take a helping stance and try to personalize the conversation from the moment I am in contact with the potential client, whether this is on the phone or in an e-mail or in a first meeting over lunch. I am not there to scout or diagnose or develop a contract with the client; I am there to help in whatever way I can. If what I hear totally turns me off or asks me to do something that I can't or won't do, I have to be authentic and find a way to communicate that but to do so in a way that will still be seen as helpful.

This dilemma often comes up when a client wants me to recommend or do a particular kind of "culture survey," or do something in a mindless way without considering the consequences. I could just say no, but that would not be helpful. To be helpful and consistent with this new model, I would prefer to say, "Tell me a little bit more about what you have in mind." "Why do you want to do this culture survey?" "What problem are you trying to solve?" And so on. To be able to do this requires adopting a new attitude in approaching those first contacts.

Humble Consulting Requires a New Attitude of Humility, a Commitment to Helping, and Curiosity

The essence of this new attitude is humility in the face of the complexity of the problems and humility in the relationship with the client in the sense that I am there to help work things out together, not to take over the problem and run with it. I am there to empathetically honor the difficulties that the client faces and to focus on him and the situation, not on my own needs to sell myself, my skills, and my insights.

This attitude can best be captured by saying that I am genuinely committed to helping and genuinely care for the client and his or her situation. To ensure that this gets through to the client from the beginning, I allow myself to become *genuinely curious*. It is honest, spontaneous curiosity that best conveys my interest and concern for the client. This attitude can thus be characterized best by three *C*s—*commitment* to helping, *caring* for the client, and, above all, *curiosity*. I have found that this new attitude requires some new skills as well.

HC Requires New Listening and Responding Skills

The most important new skill is a different kind of listening. With all the books and programs on improving listening skills, I found that in doing this kind of consulting I had to learn yet another kind of listening than what is usually advocated, and that this new kind of listening was needed in order to know how to respond. I had to develop two kinds of empathy. Empathy One is to listen for and be curious about the actual situation or problem that the client is describing. Empathy Two is to listen for and be curious about what is really bothering the speaker as she is explaining the problem or the situation.

For example, a call comes in from a potential client who says, "I am concerned about the level of engagement of my employees. Could you help me build a culture of engagement?" Empathy One would be to explore what she means by "engagement" and "culture" by asking for examples. Empathy Two would be to ask, "What is it that is concerning you; why are you worried about this?"

We can listen for both things, but at some point we have to decide whether to pursue our curiosity about the content and the situation or our curiosity about the caller. In either case, we have to learn that we have a broad range of possible questions and reactions available to us, and it makes a difference which kinds of questions we choose to ask or which kinds of responses we choose to make. Similarly, we have a real choice in how much to personalize the situation by the kinds of questions we ask, or by the kinds of things we reveal about ourselves. An analysis of these initial choices will be the focus of Chapter 4.

Personalizing the relationship is common to all of these points and must therefore be looked at more closely in that it changes the fundamental role of the consultant/helper.

HC Is a New and Different "Personal Role" for the Consultant

The word *consulting* traditionally connotes "to help in the role of expert and/or doctor" by providing expert information, services, diagnoses, and prescriptions in the form of recommendations while, above all, keeping professional distance. Although this role may continue to work for well-defined technical problems, it has become less and less useful because "the problem" cannot be defined clearly enough to enable the helper to know what to do that would be really helpful.

In the new HC role, the consultant's primary purpose is to enable the client to figure out and make sense of what is really worrying her, what is really on her mind. The consultant has to become a *partner* and *helper* even in that first inquiry into what is going on and what is worrying the client. For example, in a video consultation with a group of leaders of five organizations that had recently merged, I was asked how the five groups might now get together to create a common marketing program so that the community would know what the new merged services were.

Instead of proposing something about team building for the five groups, I found myself asking questions about what the service actually was—literacy programs and remedial reading clinics—why they had merged, and what had gotten in the way of their developing a marketing program. In that process I gradually realized that what really worried them was not how to find common ground but that each group would lose its unique skill.

What we worked out together, even in this first phone call, was the adaptive move that they really had to make first. That adaptive move was to observe each other actually working and learn from this what was for each of the five groups their unique skill and how that might fit the community's needs. They did not need a common marketing program; they first needed to get to know one another at a more fundamental, personal level.

To elicit genuine information from the client and to be able to process it, the consultant must work together with the client at a more personal level, Level Two. How personalization plays out will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 5. To make this work the consultant must have the paradoxical ability to be empathetic to the client and to the client's situation yet not to be "content seduced" but to stay focused on various processes that are occurring between the consultant and the client. These various process choices will be the focus of Chapter 6.

Dealing with the new complex, messy problems will, in the end, require new and innovative responses from the consultant.

HC Encourages a Wider Range of Consultant Behavior Based on the Consultant Being Open, Authentic, and Innovative in the Relationship

What should be the basis of my action, of how I respond in dialogue with the client? Do I stick closely to just humble inquiry? Do I blurt out whatever is on my mind? Do I give advice when I think I know the answer? Do I reveal how the project may help me and how it fits into my skill set? Do I inquire based on needing to know how the client's issues connect to my skills, or do I just keep going with curiosity and see where it leads?

The answer may be "any of these," depending on the circumstances of the moment. If the goal is to build an open and trusting relationship, I have to try to be authentic. If I see something that does not make sense or asks something of me that I don't want to do, I have to say so and explain, knowing that in the explanation I may actually provide help by bringing up issues that the client may not have even thought of. As we will see in several cases, it was my unwillingness to do what the client wanted that led to real help.

Where is innovation in all of this? Aren't what I am calling adaptive moves just interventions with a new name? Some adaptive moves may indeed be the standard kinds of interventions if the conversation leads to that conclusion, but more often than not I have found that adaptive moves are usually shorter and often counterintuitive. If we change who is in the room, change who is doing the sense making, and also change the nature of the conversation from problem solving and discussion/debate to genuine *dialogue*, all kinds of new adaptive moves will occur to people, especially if we remember that a "move" is not necessarily part of any plan. It is just a move.

The new model for consultant behavior will be more like improvisation theater or a jazz band than formal scripts, rules, or standardized guides and checklists. A major part of this will be to change the nature of the conversation from discussion and/or debate into more of a dialogue around the campfire.

HC Will Be Most Effective If the New Conversations Become Dialogues

This element may be the most different from traditional models because a Level Two relationship makes it possible to have an entirely different kind of conversation, a dialogic joint exploration based on both consultant and client accepting the reality that neither of them knows where the conversation is going or what kinds of adaptive moves we may think of if we give up the typical goal-oriented competitive problem-solving discussion that we are so often pushed into by the pressures of time and our limited models of what a conversation could be. Getting the right people into the room and having a dialogic exploration of the complex mess may be the best model of the future of effective helping.

How the New Elements Fit Together Logically

As I reviewed my various cases over the years, I realized that the essence of this new model was already evident in many of my experiences, but I now have to pull it together and describe it for others. This new model does not tell me what to do, but it provides me a way to think about what is happening to clients and what attitudes and skills I have to develop to be really helpful to them. I call it *Humble* Consulting because I am in awe of the complexity of the problems and of the difficulties that clients face in trying to move forward.

I also realize that there is an intrinsic logic to this combination of new things that can best be viewed in terms of the following ten working propositions:

1. To be really helpful requires locating what the real problem is, that is, what is worrying the client?

2. To locate what is worrying the client requires open and trusting communication between client and helper.

3. To facilitate open and trusting communication requires building a Level Two personal working relationship that goes beyond the formal Level One professional relationship of most helping situations.

4. To build such a Level Two working relationship requires some amount of personalization of the relationship.

5. To personalize the relationship requires humble inquiry by asking more-personal questions or revealing more-personal thoughts or feelings.

6. To build a personal Level Two relationship requires that the consultant convey this intention in the initial contact with the client.

7. To make sense of what is bothering the client, once a Level Two working relationship is building, helper and client must engage in a *joint* dialogic process.

8. To determine whether there are several things bothering the client for which no single solution will help requires careful review by both consultant and client.

9. To decide where action is needed, consultant and client have to *jointly decide* on priorities and what actions to take.

10. If the problem is simple and clear, the helper should go into the expert or doctor role or refer the client to an expert or doctor. If the problem turns out to be complex and messy, the client and helper should engage in a dialogue to figure out a feasible *adaptive move*, knowing that this may not *solve* the problem but will provide some comfort and will reveal new information on the basis of which to figure out the *next adaptive move*.

Adaptive moves have to be *joint decisions* because the consultant will never know enough about the client's personal situation or organizational culture, and the client will never know enough about all the consequences of a given intervention such as a survey or other diagnostic process tool. Therefore, one of the consultant's responsibilities is also to understand the consequences of certain kinds of adaptive moves such as diagnostic interviews and surveys, and to fully brief the client about those consequences to determine whether or not the client is ready for such moves.

What Does It Mean to Really Help?

I think of help as doing something with and for clients that they cannot do by themselves. The ultimate judgment of whether what I have done has been helpful or not is basically up to the client to decide. If I feel I have helped but the client has not felt helped, then I have not helped. So where does *really helping* fit by this criterion? In the kinds of complex, messy problems I have described, whether I am being helpful or not has to be perpetually evaluated by both the client and me. Sometimes the client will see things that have improved the situation or will have gained clarity about what to do next without my knowing it. Sometimes I will see things that have clearly improved the situation that the client has not perceived, and we will agree that help has been provided.

My clients and I will discover that the first real help is my enabling them to see the true complexity and messiness of the problem situation and help them to abandon quick fixes and/or knee-jerk reactions. Beyond that, the real help will be to evolve the right adaptive moves to deal with the realities of the situation that I help them to identify.

How Can HC Possibly Be Faster?

How HC can be faster is to some degree logical and to some degree paradoxical. Logically, it is faster because I am at the outset only trying to make enough sense of the complex mess to identify a next