



A Reflective Paper on the Management Consultancy Project
for Vegapalm Ltd

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Vegapalm Ltd, is a long established, well-known family run, Bournemouth local business specialised in selling paint for motor vehicles. Over the past decades, it has been able to survive based on a good reputation earned through word of mouth.

However, as today's market becomes increasingly competitive, the current owner of Vegapalm has realised that it would make company stronger and healthier in the long run by expanding its existing customer base. Acting as consultants, with my fellow colleagues, our task was to find the most cost effective and efficient way of doing this.

The purpose of this report is therefore to reflect on the process of this management consultancy activity in which I have personally participated in along with Harish Ramachandran, Vivian Dou and Maria Lopatina over a course of six weeks. In order to do so, this report shall take a thematic approach with specific examination of client-consultant relationships and will be divided into three main parts: starting with an overview on the basic process and approaches of this consultancy project, followed by a section on the assessment of managing the relationships with the client, an evaluation will be followed as the result.

1 Consulting Process

1.1 Literature Reviews

In a board sense, management consultancy is a term that refers to the activities which have been carried out by an independent person or persons aimed at helping organisations improve their performance. This is usually done by consultants through a thorough analysis of existing business problems or issues, followed by a development of plans for improvement. (Institute of Business Consulting) The existing models have suggested that the whole consulting process normally starts with an identification of a problem or issue within the client's organisation that need to be investigated in, then the focus moves on to analyse of such problem or issue: find ways to overcome them, the next stage would be to recommend solutions to clients through a combination of presentation and reports, finally the whole process ends in helping clients to implement the recommendations. (Salder, ed 1998) Each of these four stages has its own unique function, serves its own purpose but at the same time, is inter-linked to the others in sequence. However, during the practical process, due to the course requirements, time and resource constrains, we could not be able to see the implementation stage, thus this report would only concern the first three stages of the consulting process.

The following session will be an assessment of this models based on our own recent experience in helping Vegapalm to develop its marketing strategy. This will be done through a chronological diary with evaluative commentary follows by.

1.2 Consulting Process for Vegapalm

1.2.1 Wednesday 20th February 2008 First Meeting with Client (The Entry Phase)

This was the first official meeting with client as a team. In the meeting, for us, it was mainly on learning about the client, trying to understand the problem and issues that the client was facing from his perspective, and drawing the scope for the potential project based on our capabilities and his expectation.

The whole atmosphere was very good; the client was friendly and was willing to help us as much as he could by providing almost all the relevant information we asked for.

This meeting was particular important for both of us, according to the literature (Hussey in Salder 1998), in reality, for real consultants, a good first meeting would normally means winning over the contract from their competitors. But for us, although this was largely a university assignment, a good start would still help us a lot in ensuring the smoothness of the progress in the later stage of the project. As the result, three main objectives for the first meeting as defined in the literature (Hussey in Salder 1998): understanding (the problem or issue), Relationship building selling and Contractual (initial stage of agreement) all have been achieved.

1.2.2 Monday 25th February 2008 Second Meeting with Client (Agreeing the Brief and its Scope-the Entry Phase)

The second meeting with client was taking place five days after the first meeting; the main purpose of this meeting was to agree on the brief and its scope which we have drawn from the previous meeting.

In this meeting, it was involved some of the negotiations on the key objectives of the project. This was largely due to the different perceptions on the problem that client was facing. With the knowledge we acquired from the research we have done before the meeting, we have been able to convince the client to adopt our ideas and thoughts in dealing with his business problem to a large extent. This meeting was resulted in agreeing brief for the project and its scope between client and us.

1.2.3 Wednesday 27th February 2008 Team Meeting (Planning the Project- the Entry Phase)

With key objectives for the project have been finalised, the direction of the project became clearer, team decided to meet up soon after the second meeting with client. The purpose of this meeting within team was to plan the project; this includes defining the key steps for completing the project, allocating the individual task based on personal preference and skills and setting out completion dates.

This meeting was proved to be crucial and successful, after meeting, everyone in the team knows exactly about how and when to complete this project and his/her role and job within the team.

1.2.4 First Two Weeks of March 2008 Data Collection and Analysis Phase

We have spent the first two weeks of March in collecting necessary data (both internal and external, from books, internet, client and customers) for completing our project and analysis of the data we have collected.

During this stage, we met our client on a weekly basis to inform him our progress and discuss our findings. Meetings were usually short, but very constructive. We both felt that we have learnt something from each other in terms of knowledge of the industry and possible marketing strategies.

1.2.5 Presenting Advice and Solutions Phase

We have done this through a formal power-point presentation to summaries our findings aided by a report in full details.

Although the presentation was largely successful, client agreed on most of our recommendations, but some improvements could be made. One was that we should get the client to involve more in the presentation stage rather than one to present and one to listen. This could be done through more open discussion in a more relaxed atmosphere. Thus it would make our efforts and findings valued even more by the client.

1.3 The Process Evaluation

Looking back, the overall process of our consultancy project was consisted the stage of identify client's problem that need to be looked into (first and second meeting with client); analysis and evaluate of such problem (team meeting on 27th February); collecting and analysis of data for solving the problem (in the first two weeks of March); create solutions (third week of March) and present our findings to the client (presentation stage). This was largely reflected the model that suggested in Sadler's book (eds, 1998).

2. Client-Consultant Relationship

However, after all, consultancy is about consultant to help to solve something in which client unable to do or choose not to do so for themselves. The central to this game involves giving (from consultant) and receiving (to clients) of the professional service. Thus how to ensure that consultant has given the right information or knowledge that client is needed for and client has received them correctly becomes a

core issue and determines to a very large extent the success of the project. There are many skills required for consultant during this process; one of them for consultant however was about to manage customer relationships. This section is to study such relationship.

2.1 Literature Reviews

2.1.1 The Relationship Dimensions

In almost all social relationships, three dimensions have been identified by Greenson. (quoted in Mulligan and Barber, Sadler, eds 1998, 68) They are:

- Contractual relationship: a working relationship is formed based on a level of social agreement where rules and boundaries have clearly been drawn
- The idealised relationship: a personal relationship such as friends or parent and child where the boundaries and rules have not been clearly drawn. There is more open communication between each other than the first one.
- The authentic relationship: a level of relationship well above the first two

In the ideal world, according to Mulligan and Barber (Sadler, 1998, 68), the relationship between consultant and client should be more like a parent and a child, where consultant acts as an expert and is willing to transfer his or her knowledge and expertise to the client. Disagreeing to Mulligan and Barber's (Sadler, 1998, 68) point of view, Czerniawska (2002) argues that in the most effective consultancy projects, client and consultant tends to work as members of a team, each to bring their own knowledge and resources to solve the problem together, thus it would make client appreciate more, and eventually enabled the successful transformation of the ownership of the recommendations from the consultant to the client. To do that, consultant needs to play a correct role at a correct time in their interaction with the client. The following section will examine the consulting approaches.

2.1.2 Consulting Approaches

Different situation requires consultant to find a different way in helping the clients. The consultant is always facing a dilemma during the consultancy process and either takes up a role as an 'expert' to give full advice to the client on what to do and how to solve the outstanding problem or issue; or plays as a 'facilitator,' to help the client to figure out the solution for themselves. (Critchley in Sadler 1998, Schein 1999) It is therefore important to define what role that consultant could play throughout consultancy activity. As the result, Schein (1999) developed three helping models:

'The Purchase of Information Model'- the client has correctly diagnosed the problem, the cause of it and expecting outcome. But need someone to help to solve such problem. In this model, the purpose of consultancy is thus to help client to solve a known problem.

‘The Doctor -Patient Model’- in this case, client has interpreted the area of problem, but need someone’s help to identify the true cause of it. Thus, the consultant’s job is to discover the real problem for client.

‘Process Consultation Model’- where the client does not even know the area of the problem, it therefore needs consultant’s help to identify the cause of it and find a most appropriate solution for such cause.

In both purchase of information and doctor-patient model, consultant will need to be an expert in such problematic area, thus could provide full correct advice to the client in relation to solve the problem. However, in the process consultation model, consultant will not act as an expert but instead a helper, and their role is to facilitate the solutions for clients.

2.2 Client-Consultant Relationship in the Project for Vegapalm

Our relationship with Vegapalm was half way through between contractual and idealised relationships. This is because on one hand, we were there to help Vegapalm to develop its marketing strategy; on other hand, they were helping us to complete our university assignment due to the personal contact between me and the current owner of the company.

As the result, there was a constant change in the role we were playing. In the first meeting with the client, we were there to learn things and show him what we can do, thus we were the student on one hand and demonstrator on other (but not an expert in his field of business). In the following meetings, however, we became more like an expert, trying to persuade client to accept our ideas and findings for the project. Thus there was no absolute one role for consultant to play throughout project. What is important however is that to choose a right approach at a right time during the stages of process. Therefore, all the theories by various authors mentioned above were right in some ways and wrong in others. Sometimes, it is just difficult to draw a clear boundary between things.

3. Evaluation

From my personal experience in doing this consultancy project for Vegapalm, I feel that I have learnt a lot in terms of how to do a consultant’s job. I have seen and participated in the development of the project from start all the way to the end (the implementation stage was missing though) and realised that importance of team working, managing relationship with others (particular to the client) in contributing to the success. It was worthwhile and definitely would recommend to the following students.

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