CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Managing Relationships in the Performance Improvement Process

Jane Ranshaw

OVERVIEW: HELPING RELATIONSHIPS

Performance improvement and consulting are helping relationships in which the practitioners must accomplish their goals through influence rather then direct action as a line manager would do (Block, 2000; Schein, 1999). Because they rarely have the authority to implement changes, they must rely on their relationships with line managers. More projects fail because of poorly managed relationships, including poor communication, between the various players than any other single reason. (A simple search of the term ''project failure'' on the Internet will produce more than eight million responses; a more targeted search results in hundreds of articles.) In a July 28, 2008, article for itsmwatch.com, columnist Hank Marquis of Enterprise Management Associates, writes ''A recent survey of over 1,000 IT workers engaged in failed projects found that the reason most IT projects fail was due to poor communications. About 28 percent of respondents said poor communication is the number one cause of project failure.''

While most research deals with information technology and related fields, the principles apply more widely. In fact, the need for managing relationships occurs well before any project. A good business relationship requires trust and knowledge of each other, and these take time to build.

The emphasis in this chapter is on managing relationships within one's own and client organizations. First, we must identify the relationships we want to manage, beginning with ourselves and including the many types of relationships we find in organizations. Next is contracting between the consultant and the client. Everyone can remember a situation that foundered because of unclear expectations. And, regardless of the clarity and specificity of the contract, every performance improvement consultant can expect to encounter resistance on most projects. The later part of this chapter examines the kinds of resistance one should anticipate and how to handle them.

IDENTIFYING RELATIONSHIPS

The first step in managing relationships is to identify the ones you want to manage. Sometimes the reason is obvious: you will have some type of relationship with your boss and immediate co-workers. Others occur because potential clients contact you or your organization about a project. Still others occur because performance improvement practitioners have strategically identified the relationships that will help them add the most value to their organizations.

What Your Intent Is

The first relationship to manage is the one you have with yourself. While you don't have to undergo psychoanalysis, you should assess your own strengths and weaknesses. (See Exhibit 18.5. My Personal SWOT Analysis at the end of this chapter.)

Keep in mind that sometimes skills involve much more than specialized knowledge. When the author was beginning her career as a technical writer in the early 1980s, one of her first clients was a consulting firm whose client wanted a reference and custom learning program for a new word processor. She was intimidated by the other two writers because they both had considerable experience in the field. The author had a vague idea of what computers were, but she decided to view the project as an opportunity to learn about a new topic. The project encountered challenges typical of any emerging area, and rewrite after rewrite ensued for all the writers. At the end of the project, the client asked her to undertake some additional work, which proved to be relatively easy and fairly lucrative. When all the work was completed, the author asked the client why they had selected her for this final phase. After all, the other two knew much more about writing for computer users. ''You were the only one we were still speaking to,'' said the client. The author's decision to accept the client's sometimes acerbic comments and demands for seemingly endless rewrites as a learning experience deepened the relationship between herself and the client. The experience was also a lesson in contracting, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Before establishing relationships with others, you must have a reason. Ask yourself, ''Why do I want this relationship?'' ''Is this an opportunity to learn new skills?'' ''Is this a person I can help?'' The best relationships begin with positive intent and involve reciprocity. Positive intent refers to motivation. To be truly successful at managing relationships, you must begin with a genuine concern to be of help and to add value to your organization. Avoid looking as each new person you meet as an instant potential client or road to a client (and ignoring anyone who doesn't meet that criterion). Also, be cautious of seeing every relationship as an opportunity to practice your hard-won performance improvement skills; you run the risk of being a solution looking for a problem. Look at each new contact as someone who has an interesting story to tell before jumping to conclusions. Be prepared to listen well and help the other person identify true needs. Sometimes the best advice is that not given. Being non-judging can help build trust, which is a solid foundation for any relationship.

At the same time, you must consider what's in it for you. Make conscious decisions about what you want from the different kinds of relationships you have. Be prepared to let go of relationships that do not let you meet your personal or organizational goals. You do not serve your organization well if you become a servant of line organizations. Do keep in mind, however, that clients often do know what they want and your role is to focus their efforts.

The Purpose of the Relationship

Whether the performance improvement practitioner is an internal or external consultant, the obvious purpose for most business relationships is straightforward: work. Those who put too much emphasis on an immediate, direct payoff, however, are overlooking fields rich with opportunities. Other purposes include:

- *Identify needs not currently identified by the persons directly involved*—Successful performance improvement groups often find that a line operation is reluctant to approach them (or the line managers may be oblivious to the possibilities the group presents). Rather than trying to convert the managers in a heretofore resistant group, they choose a less direct approach by partnering with other key support groups such as purchasing or accounting.

  One group of internal consultants visited with supervisors on the third shift (at a little after midnight) to discuss challenges around training schedules. From this initial contact, they learned about organizational issues unique to shift workers, real-life operations in the company, and new areas where they could support mid-level plant managers. Over the next two years, they were able to forge relationships with supervisors on all shifts and found new ways to add value.
- *Learn more about the culture of the organization*—Simply spending time with people from different parts of the organization helps performance improvement practitioners soak up knowledge about differences within

an organization's culture. Accountants really are different from salespeople, and corporate operations rarely parallel their field counterparts. Although the differences are often subtle, they are nonetheless real, and the only way to absorb them is from contact beyond occasional, formal meetings.

Ask people from different departments to explain how their operations work. You could ask them to make a presentation to your group or take a peer from another group to lunch. Keep your antennae out for any issues with which you might help, of course, but don't expect an immediate payoff. In fact, your colleague knows more about his or her organization and may be more likely than you are to see opportunities for you.

- *Find resources that can help other parts of the organization*—Real win-win solutions occur whenever a performance improvement professional is able to introduce other resources to a group needing assistance. One practitioner at a Chicago bank discovered that the compliance department was spending hours each month manually transferring numbers from one report to its own spreadsheet. They had repeatedly asked "someone in IT" for help and had been told the effort was too great for the value received. In less than an hour, the practitioner learned they were asking the wrong group for assistance. She referred the compliance people to a different group in the IT department, and the problem was quickly solved. While she had never worked with either group on a project, by involving pure performance improvement principles, she helped her colleagues solve a problem and built friends.
- *Find mentors/be a mentor*—Everyone can benefit from the advice of more seasoned co-workers, especially those whose specializations are in areas other then performance improvement. Be a bit cautious, however, of people who seem a bit too eager to establish a relationship. Mentoring relationships work best if each person keeps a respectful distance, at least in the beginning. Friendships often do develop between co-workers, of course, but they should evolve naturally. Also, be aware that, as in the rest of life, there can be sudden shifts in once-stable relationships. Remember that time in junior high school when your dearest and best friend suddenly switched sides and became buddies with the person you both hated the week before? In some ways, corporate relationships haven't evolved beyond that standard.

With Whom to Have Relationships

The temptation is to say you need relationships with everyone. There are, however, not enough hours in the day to follow through on that type of commitment. You need to learn those areas in which you might provide PI assistance. Look for people who can either hire you or refer you, of course, but also look for those who can champion you. Needless to say, the best referrals are from those who can also support you. Since there is so much emphasis in organizations today on different demographic groups, look for people whose experiences are different from your own. Are you a Baby Boomer? Then look for people who are Gen X or Y or Millennials. Don't worry if you aren't sure what those terms mean; the point is to aim for age diversity as well as ethnic, regional, racial, and others.

Type of Relationship You Want with Clients

You should develop a strategy for achieving the type of helping relationship you want with your internal or external clients. Decisions made at the initial stage have important implications for the future of the relationship. Also, consider what you can offer to and gain from other relationships. Two of the leading experts who have defined consultant/client relationships are Peter Block, author of *Flawless Consulting* (2000), and Edgar Schein, author of *Process Consultation* and *Process Consultation Revisited* (1999). Their works form the basis for the relationships discussed here.

Most performance improvement projects involve more than one type of relationship, and relationships may shift during the course of a project. As Edgar Schein (1999) notes, the consultant ''must choose from one moment to the next which role to be in.''

Pair of Hands. Block (2000) coined this term. In this role, the consultant acts as a direct result of specific instruction from the client and has little influence. He or she is often viewed as a contractor with limited skills. Opportunities to deepen or expand these relationships are rare and control is firmly in the client's hands. The client is definitely in the one-up position and is likely to remain that way. Consultants may work in the ''pair of hands'' on occasion if the tasks revolve around their routine job duties, or if there is an opportunity to learn about a new field. But over time, the most rewarding relationships are those that involve more than your ''hands.''

Expertise. Consultants assume an ''expertise'' role when they offer certain areas of specialization such as workshops or seminars. Quite often the role is similar to many outsourcing relationships today. While they may work closely with the client to present a customized session, they usually have little influence on line managers. Of course, any role can be a platform for developing deeper relationships, but most consultants find it difficult to expand beyond their areas of acknowledged expertise. Clients tend to put the consultant in a box with a special label and call on him or her for limited opportunities. The consultant may even be seen as a peer, but the relationship is definitely at arm's length.

Expert (Block)/Doctor (Schein). In these relationships, the consultant is seen as all-knowing and assumes all responsibility for the project. As Block points out (2000, p. 19), however, purely technical problems are rare. There is a considerable chance that underlying problems will remain unaddressed and client commitment to even identify them, let alone address them, will be minimal. The author once worked on a pro bono consulting project with a group of fellow alumni/ae from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. The client was a small non-profit organization facing a serious challenge in fund-raising. The group's board of directors was thrilled to be getting some advice from a group of experienced professionals. Early in the project, the consultants learned they were the third group the non-profit had approached in the last four years; in fact, the organization gave the consultants copies of the previous two efforts. Unsurprisingly, they found the reports contained solid advice the non-profit board had ignored. The consultants realized their recommendations would most likely remain unimplemented as well and withdrew from the project. Their only recommendation was to follow the advice previously given.

In the situation just described, the board of the (now potential) client first tried to explain why it had not been able to follow the solutions outlined in the reports. As any consultant who has served in the expert or doctor role will instantly recognize, the client was trying to blame a refusal to implement an outsider's advice on the poor quality of the previous consultants. The consultants stood their ground, which was made easier because the project was pro bono. Internal consultants or external consultants who have been having some lean weeks or months understand that walking away is often more difficult. In those situations, the best one might be able to do is to begin surfacing the client's resistance as soon as possible. In other words, the consultant begins to act more collaboratively while the client is still thinking he or she is an expert.

Collaborator (Block)/Process Consultant (Schein). In these roles, the client and consultant form a true partnership, which offers the best chance for constructive change. In this relationship the client has equal responsibility for the outcome and great interest in successful implementation. They identify and diagnose problems together and develop implementation. There is opportunity for both to grow in the relationship. The ultimate goals are to solve problems so they stay solved and to enable clients to solve similar problems on their own in the future.

Type of Relationship You Want with Peers

Peers can be a significant source of support and opportunity or they can be seen as competitors. In fact, they are often both. The challenge for the consultant is to decide whether to be open in such relationships or to be closed and guarded. The author's experience over many years is to opt for openness when appropriate.

Of course, openness does not mean the consultant should share all sorts of personal information or impose on his or her colleague. Today's peer might be tomorrow's client, and the consultant will want to already have an open, reciprocating relationship

Advisor/Mentor. One of the most rewarding relationships is that of advisor or mentor. Whether one is the mentor or the protégé, the opportunities for personal growth are wonderful (and sometimes painful). An advisor or mentor is someone who can help the consultant move from a pair of hand, expertise, or expert/doctor role to a more collaborative one.

Listener. Sometimes the best relationship is the one with the person who will listen to you rant (usually for a predetermined time) and say little or nothing. The listener's role is to be supportive and offer advice only when it is requested.

Resource. Some people always seem to know who the best website developer is or where to take a client to a lunch that isn't too expensive yet doesn't leave you looking like a cheapskate. They may not know everyone, but they can get you there in a few steps.

The lesson is that there is some type of constructive, helping relationship opportunity with nearly everyone. Not all relationships need to be intense as others, but all relationships can be positive. Establishing relationships is often easier than people think. Here are some ideas, and you can also use Exhibits 18.1 and 18.2:

Exhibit 18.1 Checklist for Establishing Relationships

1. Learn about the organization's core business.
   - Attend staff meetings, trade shows, and any other gathering of line managers.
   - Shadow managers.
   - Ask to be included on distribution lists.
   - Read the same trade publications managers read.
2. Perform your core functions expertly. Successful consultants find that the best clients are those with whom they have worked closely and who are happy with the results. By proving you know your more immediate field, you will build trust.
3. Avoid being an order-taker by offering suggestions for alternative approaches that will advance business goals. For example, instead of adding permanent staff, might the client contract out work during busy times?

(*continued*)

4. Be willing to let go of personal or department-related goals that don't advance business goals.
5. Network assertively to help identify business needs and market yourself and your department. This means attending every company function you can—even the boring ones.
6. Be flexible. Meet one-on-one with managers and listen to their problems before pronouncing your ''solutions.''
7. Ask questions.
8. Approach every situation as having potential for learning and sharing.
9. Attend meetings at lower levels, and let the news ''bubble up.''
10. Anticipate resistance and work to counter it in advance.
11. Publish a department newsletter or write a column for the company newsletter. Use case studies that highlight how different areas of the company benefited from your advice or programs. Use quotes when possible.
12. Write for professional publications. Then share reprints with key internal managers.
13. Speak publicly and at company functions such as sales meetings.
14. Find mentors/coaches. Listen, learn, and leverage your mentors' skills and experience to advance your career.
15. Be a mentor/coach. Be generous in helping co-workers. Most will return the favor.
16. Volunteer—wisely—for projects within your organization. Look for projects that will let you make a real contribution while allowing you to position yourself and your department in the best possible light.
17. Finally, be consistent within your own organization's culture. If yours is more closed, start small and build on successes.

Establishing Relationships

- *Use the direct approach*—Take someone from another area to lunch. For internal and external consultants, consider informational interviews. For example, you might ask a client to review an article you've written for the company newsletter or other publication.
- *Offer to help a colleague with a project he or she is working on*—Your assistance need not be extensive; it can be as simple as giving your colleague a good resource or reviewing a draft of a report.

Exhibit 18.2 Identifying Target Relationships

Think of a current or potential client. Briefly describe your current relationship. Next, think about what your desired role as a consultant would be. Last, create a strategy you can use to begin moving into the desired relationship.

Identify Client Relationship

Client:

____

____

Current Relationship:

____

____

Desired Relationship:

____

____

Strategy:

____

____

Other resources that will help me implement this strategy:

____

____

- *Perfect your elevator speech*—Sometimes the briefest of encounters can lead to long relationships. Remember the strength of weak ties: casual conversations often lead to valuable results.

CONTRACTING

The second step in managing relationships is to contract successfully. You, your client, and, if you are an internal consultant, your boss must have a full, clear understanding of a situation before agreeing to taking on a client's project. Schein (1999) states the basic purpose of any agreement: *make visible that which is invisible*. To ensure that the relationship survives intact, you must begin making everything visible from the very first contact. The maxim has a few limits, of course. Mentioning successful projects can build the client's trust. Describing them in great detail or dwelling on past mistakes can be a tactical error. Also, remember that your first job is to make sure you understand what the client needs. Avoid citing your own experience until you know it is relevant to the current discussion.

Early in her career, the author was asked by a colleague to meet with a client of his who needed documentation for a new computer system. Her colleague had been a successful salesman with IBM and assured her the meeting was probably a formality, but one never knows for sure. The author had several recent documentation projects to show as samples and made sure to bring as many as would fit in a canvas bag. She was concerned about whether the client would trust her experience so, at the first opportunity, she shared the samples with the client. She cleverly pointed out, in some detail, how each one applied to the project under consideration.

She evidently did a masterful job; by the end of the meeting, the client had offered her the assignment. Afterward, she asked her colleague for feedback, and they agreed to meet at a nearby coffee shop. She took a seat, waiting for his praise on her selling technique. Instead, his first comment was, ''Do you have to talk so much?!'' Evidently there is such a thing as too much visibility.

The lesson is to avoid revealing everything in the first meeting. You will seem overeager and unsure. Rather than impress a client, you may convince him or her that you care only about your perspective.

What You Can Give

Performance improvement practitioners must know what they have to offer clients beyond a specific set of skills. Their first responsibility is to discover, or help the client discover, what the challenge is. At the same time, you must have a clear understanding of what you can give to the client—not so you can recite your qualifications at the first opening, but to have the confidence in yourself that you can help the client.

Perhaps you want to revisit your SWOT analysis at the end of the chapter. In addition to strengths such as knowledge and experience, consider your ability to trust others, be honest but tactful, and know how to support others. Then there is the issue of genuineness or, as Peter Block terms it, authenticity. Other strengths include interpersonal skills such as listening or being able to bring disparate groups together.

What You Have a Right to Expect

Block's key messages is that you have a right to succeed and, therefore, you should be able to expect honesty, fairness, access to confidential information and people who have been involved on both sides of issues. You must also feel confident that the climate in the department is such that the manager will be able to implement the process you help him or her to develop. When you sense that your client is a less-than-willing partner, consider whether you should continue the relationship. (See Handling Resistance later in this chapter.)

BUILDING THE CONTRACTUAL RELATIONSHIP: THE SUBSTANTIVE SIDE

A contract is not just a piece of paper stating conditions each side will meet. Long before the contract is written, the client and consultant must agree on what will happen, who will do what and why. While written contracts are important, they are a reflection of the relationship rather than a simple list of deliverables and fees. Every contract reflects both a substantive, factual agreement and emotional commitment. Exactly what are you and the client agreeing on? Ask direct questions. You need to show that you want to provide a real solution the client can own. The following questions will help you start. Listen to both the substantive and emotional parts of the answers. You do not necessarily need to ask all the questions yourself, but you do need answers to all the questions. Watch your tone. You are asking substantive questions, looking for factual information. If a client seems to react more emotionally that you expected, explore any misunderstandings. Don't let the steam build up.

What Created the Need

The start of most helping relationship is to understand where the pain is. When there is no urgent need or when the client has to think too long to answer, you should be concerned about the client's motivation for finding a solution. Either the client doesn't know how the need came about, doesn't care, or doesn't trust you. Most people like to tell stories; in contracting discussions, people who feel a need are eager to share theirs. You should be prepared to listen to several stories. That's OK. Listen to them.

What If We Do Nothing

At some time during the life of any project, someone is sure to ask you, your client, or your client's boss, ''What if we do nothing?'' While there are times when doing nothing may be the best option, you must have an answer. Many projects are derailed because a person cannot answer this question succinctly. In addition to saving a valuable project from the dust heap, you avoid looking like someone who doesn't know what he or she is doing nor why you are doing it. Asking the about the ''do nothing'' options helps in other ways:

- First, you can *further sharpen the insights* gained from asking about what created the need. The need for a project is often found in understanding what will happen if action is not taken.
- Second, you can get a further *sense of the client's commitment* to the project. If a client isn't committed, your chances of success drop dramatically. Avoid injecting your own scenarios in hopes of motivating your

client. The problem may be that he or she knows the probable outcome but either doesn't care or in some way prefers it.

- Third, you help the *manager sharpen his or her responses* to others who will inevitably ask the same question.
- Last, but certainly not least, you will gain many points to *help you identify the benefits* your eventual proposal will offer.

How to Evaluate Success

Some clients will know immediately how they'll evaluate your success and will not hesitate to tell you. This response is especially true if there are readily available metrics such as retention or recruitment. For those who have more difficulty in identifying a way to measure success, consider a balanced scorecard approach. (For more about balanced scorecards, see balancedscorecard.org.)

No matter what metrics you and the client agree on, use caution when agreeing to measures of success. Consider how much your work will affect the final outcome. For example, suppose you are asked to help a client whose department has experienced problems with harassment. While an obvious sign of success would be to reduce or eliminate the problem, there are many factors that may be beyond your or the client's control. Still, fewer complaints or more time between complaints may indicate improvement. Try to find a metric on which both you and the client agree. While attending training on the topic is no guarantee that problems will be eliminated, it may be the only reasonable measure to expect.

Who Approves and Their Needs

Quite often, you may find yourself talking to a proxy for the true client. The proxy may lack even basic information and may or may not fully support the effort. Can you talk to the approvers? If not, do you trust the proxy client to be giving a fair representation of the client's views?

What the Schedule Is

In most situations, neither you nor the client will be able to set a firm, detailed schedule in your initial discussions. You should, however, be able to agree on key milestones. Use a calendar when setting any dates. Be sensitive to religious holidays other than your own. A consultant was embarrassed to learn that he had scheduled a key meeting on the Greek Orthodox Christmas. He had thought everyone would be back from their various holidays by then.

When you prepare a formal proposal, you want to examine all milestones carefully and always allow a bit of room for slippage. If you notice anything that might affect the milestones, even at this early stage, be sure to discuss them with the client. For example, productivity in most organizations falls during the period from mid-November through December as people gear up for the holidays. While you not want to tell the client you assume low productivity during these times, you can mention the challenge of conflicting vacation schedules.

What the Budget Is

Some clients are reluctant to share budget numbers with anyone, while others give the information freely. Whether you are internal or external, you need at least a sense of the budget to determine the best approach to take. The author has found that, when clients resist sharing the information, she can usually disarm the concern by explaining that she wants to focus on the best solution *and* meet the practicalities presented. Even if the client still refuses to give a firm number, she has found they will usually give some indicators ranging from ''Our budget is very tight this year'' to ''We want to make sure we do this right.''

What the Scope Is

Work with the client to understand what the project does and does not cover. The goal of defining the scope is to:

- Clarify the presenting problem. Believe it or not, you may still not have a clear understanding of the client's problem at this point in your process. As you discuss the scope, ask yourself whether both you and the client clearly understand the problem.
- Uncover peripheral issues and address underlying concerns.
- Agree on limitations to the project (if any).
- Identify who owns what parts of the project.
- Confirm objectives

EVALUATING THE PROJECT BEFORE CONTINUING

Pay attention to any small red flags before continuing with the consulting engagement. Every consultant has stories of not listening to that little voice telling him or her to abandon a project and in a few weeks or months realizing why he or she should have listened. The outcome is often a failed or damaged project and relationship. Before deciding the client's expectations are out of line, make sure you understand all the facts.

- *Are the client's objectives realistic?*—No client wants to hear halfway through a project that you thought his or her objectives were ''a bit out there'' from the start. If you think the client's objectives are unrealistic, treat the situation as a learning opportunity. Rather than rolling your eyes or otherwise disagreeing, ask a few probing questions. If you decide, after several probes, that the client's objectives are truly unrealistic, you must tell him or her. Avoid taking a judgmental approach. Instead, begin the discussion with something like, ''I think your objectives are very admirable, but I am concerned whether we can meet them with the information I've gotten so far. What am I missing?''

- *Can the client's need be met with the objectives you've agreed on*—The author once sat in on a meeting with two client representatives who were determined that they would have specific, measurable objectives for a program to teach factory supervisors to be more participative. It was a noble goal, but the two employees discarded objective after objective because it was too fuzzy. Rather than look for ways to quantify the objectives, they kept searching for things they could measure. Those became the objectives. The author reported back to her client that she didn't think she could add any value to the project because the two employees had a very clear vision of the path they felt impelled to take. The author wasn't sure whether it would succeed or not (it might have), but her own reluctance told her she couldn't bring her best work to the project.
- *What will realistically be different after your intervention?*—Clients often think of projects as ''silver bullets'' that will transform their organizations. Such talk is a clear signal that clients might have unrealistic expectations. Someone must take time to clarify expectations so everyone can agree on them. A simple ''Wow, that would be wonderful. Is that your expectation for this project, or do you anticipate more phases? Tell me more.''
- *What specific outcomes do you and the client hope to achieve?*—Remember, you and the client have an equal right to succeed. If you believe that either of you is not going to be successful in the project, now is the time to disengage. Internal consultants often feel caught in such situations. They must keep in mind that they do a disservice to themselves, their clients, and the organizations for which they both work if they proceed with projects that have a poor chance of succeeding.

How You Can Say No or Postpone Demands You Might Not Be Able to Fulfill

While you have a right to succeed, you can jeopardize that right by taking on more than you can accomplish. Before saying ''Yes,'' ask yourself (and/or use the checklist in Exhibit 18.3):

- Is this really a request or just a comment? Clients (and consultants) often like to theorize how a perfect situation might evolve—in a perfect world, that is. Less experienced consultants (and even some who should know better) sometimes interpret the comments as real requests and may fret

Exhibit 18.3 Preliminary Contracting Checklist

Client's Answer	**Effect on Your Approach**
What created the need?	
What if we do nothing?	
How will you evaluate success?	
Who approves? What are his or her needs?	
What is the schedule?	
What is the budget?	
What is the scope?	
Your Answer	**How to Resolve Differences**
Are the client's objectives realistic?	
Can the client's need be met with the objectives you've agreed on.	
What will realistically be different after your intervention?	

about being able to take on yet another commitment. The first step is to confirm the request.

- Does this request fit with other work/personal/professional goals? Some consultants, internal and external, feel they must say ''yes'' to every opportunity because they must fill every available hour. You don't need a detailed five- or ten-year plan, but you should have a clear sense of when a project is right for you.
- Do you have time or resources available? The old saying is, ''If you want something done, ask a busy person.'' On the other hand, if the busy person is approaching burnout, the results may be less than desired. Every consultant can recall a time when he or she took on too much and both the consultant and the projects suffered.
- Do you want to do this? The point of this question is not that you accept only projects that are high- (or low-) visibility. You want to be honest with yourself about your motivations. If you have concerns about the project, now is the time to raise them.
- What will realistically happen if you say no? The other side of the ''ask a busy person'' adage is the belief that the consultant is the best person for

the job. No one else can do the job nearly as well. In truth, many people could do a good job. Another reason for avoiding a ''no'' answer is the fear that the consultant will be punished in some way for the answer. Saying ''No'' is hard! The following process may help.

- Express a desire to help. (I'd love to help, but . . . .)
- Give facts about other commitments.
- Mention a project your boss just gave you. (You must actually name it.)
- Explain honestly why you aren't the best person for the assignment.
- Negotiate.
  - ''When do you need this?'' (A neutral question buys time and begins negotiations.)
  - Get an extended deadline on another project with the same client.
  - Delay the start date.
  - Agree and give dates that work for you.
  - Lower expectations—for example, a verbal report instead of written.
  - Ask your boss to set priorities.

Evaluate the Engagement

Intelligent questions are as meaningful as answers. Before accepting any engagement, ask the following questions:

- Is this project valuable to my organization?
- Do I understand the client's needs?
- Are the needs realistic?
- Do I already have all the information I need? One characteristic of a good proposal is that it is complete. There is no law that says you can't contact the client to ask for more information or to clarify a misunderstanding before presenting your business case.
- Does the client have it? If the client doesn't have the information, do you really need it? If the client insists on information neither of you has readily available, is it a fair request? If it seems excessive, will the client pay for it?
- What types of additional information do I need? Is it numerical or more subjective?
- Is it available within the client firm? Will the client help me find the right resources?
- Is it available from outside resources? Which ones? Who will absorb any costs? You must clarify these questions with the client.

- How precise do you need to be? Most business decisions are made with less than complete information.
- Have I clarified the deliverables? What specific outputs will I deliver to the client? A consultant contracted with a client to develop a custom training program to the client for what she considered a fair fee. At the end of the development phase, she discovered the client also expected her to deliver the program—twice! Fortunately, they were able to compromise, but the relationship was damaged. Other examples of deliverables would include a typed, written final report versus a less formal PowerPoint presentation.
- Have I surfaced all my assumptions? In the previous example, in addition to stating her assumptions, the consultant could have indicated a price for delivery. It is common practice to specify software packages the consultant will use, including version numbers, in a list of either deliverables or assumptions.
- Do I understand the form these deliverables will take: full report, presentation, and other options?
- What items am I not delivering, as agreed on when defining the scope?
- Will the client be sufficiently available? When possible, opt for face-to-face meetings that are reasonable. Some clients prefer lots—but that in itself may be a sign of resistance. Beware of clients who never want face-to-face meetings.
- Will I make formal presentations, or will they be informal updates?
- What are the arguments for proceeding with the project (the rationale)? You will need to provide sufficient background information, including present and future operating environments.
- What benefits, both tangible and intangible, will result from the project?
- What is driving the need for this project now (the justification)? Address the key drivers or reasons for your project. Examples are reliability, environmental, regulatory, safety, and financial. Some projects may have multiple drivers, while others have only one.

The Risks and Assumptions

Before concluding contracting discussions, be sure to uncover any significant events that could influence this project. For each event, discuss consequences, financial impacts, and contingency plans. Items to consider:

- Regulatory—Is a deadline or authorization needed?
- Human resources—Are necessary staff available? Or do available staff have the expertise to achieve the goals? What is the current attitude of

Exhibit 18.4 Worksheet for Evaluating the Engagement

Assumptions	Effect(s) on Project
I will be allowed to spend at least three-quarters of my time on this project?	Stopping and starting will delay the project.

the workforce? Motivated? What change management plans will be needed?

- Economic assumptions related to the project. Does a weak or strong dollar affect the project? Do interest or unemployment rates matter?

Assumptions

List the assumptions associated with the project and their effects on the project. Use Exhibit 18.4 to evaluate the engagement. Typical assumptions would include staffing levels, past budgeting levels, and corporate structure (no mergers, etc.) You need to clarify as many assumptions as possible. At the same time, you may not need to discuss all of them in advance. Depending on your relationship with the client (and your boss, if you're internal).

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS: THE EMOTIONAL SIDE

The goal in managing the emotional side of relationships is to build trust with the other person. Most of the time, people will meet you at least halfway. Until that sense of trust is firmly established, however, you must take special pains to avoid miscues that can harm it. Quite often, just taking care of the substantive part of your relationships with your clients is so time-consuming that it's easy to overlook subtle shifts in the emotional relationship.

Your first reaction might be to ignore that small voice telling you that something has changed. In many instances, you're probably right in doing so. The client may be distracted with other issues and may not be focusing on your meeting or conversation. But don't completely discount what your body is telling you. In fact, this is the precise time to listen to your body. You might be picking up on early signs of resistance or differences in communication styles.

Make sure you are communicating effectively. Poor communications can result in small misunderstandings that can grow quickly. A simple barrier, such as a different assumption about what a word means, can lead to difficulties. For example, an external consultant was talking on the phone with a client on a Friday morning. The client was rushing to a meeting and asked the consultant to call back ''next Tuesday.'' The consultant understood the date to be a few days after the day of their conversation. When she called the client the following Tuesday, she was unprepared for the client's rather rude reception. ''I told you I didn't have the information you need when we talked on Friday. Were you listening? I said that I'll try to have it for you next week!'' The client understood the word ''next'' as the Tuesday occurring in a few days. Unfortunately, the consultant reacted a bit defensively, and the relationship was rocky for several weeks. The whole situation could have been avoided if they had clarified which Tuesday the client was referring to.

Business people spend up to 80 percent of their work time communicating. Of that time, nearly half is spent in activities that involve listening. In addition, communication focuses on the two business elements that determine the success or failure of people or businesses: information and relationships. Because information and relationships are so important, understanding what successful communication is and how to achieve it is critical.

The word communicate comes from the Latin word *communicare*, which means ''to share.'' Therefore, communication means sharing information or sharing yourself. The goal is mutual understanding—making ''visible the invisible.'' The main objective for all communication—whether information- or relationship-based—is results. It requires an interactive, dynamic process.

Communication barriers often come up during work (and other) relationships. The best way to overcome them is to first admit that they exist, at least to yourself. Then select a strategy for overcoming them.

Hidden Agendas

A hidden agenda may drive a conversation. Your client may have a goal he or she is unwilling to share, yet tries to steer discussions and decisions toward that goal. Hidden agendas may be unintentional. For example, your boss may not tell you all you need to know to complete a project. The omission is not a result of a purposeful effort to thwart you; rather, it may stem from a distraction.

On the other hand, some people may hide their true agendas. They are not open to someone else's message. Personal agendas steal attention away from what others are saying. If the listener has other priorities, he or she will tend to give less attention to what others say.

For example, you might be scheduling interviews with people your client identified as key to your new project. One manager is available only late in the day. At the same time, you promised to provide the snacks for your daughter's soccer game for that same day. You don't want to tell the manager you're concerned about a conflict with an eight-year-old's soccer game. By hiding your agenda, you have created a potential for misunderstanding. If you acknowledge the possible conflict in your own mind, you can decide whether you need to call for backup on the snacks or try to find an alternative meeting time. You do not necessarily need to share the purpose of the scheduling conflict, but you do need to resolve it.

Resist the temptation to work from a hidden agenda. Be open to all ideas. Remember that you might find something of benefit to you, even if you don't expect it. Stay tuned in, even though it's difficult; you never know when a useful idea will pop up. Ask questions for better understanding. For instance, the manager who was looking for information on the meeting found that satisfactory results took longer than she had intended. Because the communication was not effective the first time, the employee had to spend more time obtaining the information the manager wanted.

Clear and Unambiguous Words

Language does not determine how anyone thinks: it transmits thinking. Words often mean different things to different people—for example, common jargon in one field becomes meaningless to outsiders. Meaning comes, to some extent, from each person's experiences and perceptions. Seemingly ordinary words can be ''loaded'' for some people. If ''discipline'' implies a reprimand to you, it is a loaded word. If someone else interprets it to mean strong, self-starting work habits, it does not carry the same emotional baggage for him or her.

- Remember that words take on meaning based on people's life and work experiences. Ask questions to make sure you and the speaker are using the same definitions for words:
- Does the speaker use any words that act as red flags for you? Are there any words you should avoid when responding?
- Avoid words you know are likely to inflame others. Also, be aware of your own reactions. Try to keep your temper when someone uses a word or phrase that is a red flag word—at least until you are certain of the speaker's intent!

Facts or Opinions

People often differ in what they consider fact. If you are working to improve the health of the people in your department, you might cite as fact articles on eating various foods and the effect of food on health. On the other hand, someone else might think the findings are opinions of well-meaning researchers—but lack the rigor necessary to call them facts. This difference is a barrier to communication. Check out what you accept as fact and what would satisfy you in presenting such a case. One person might have more technical information than another person has. Recognize the difference between facts and opinions.

Do you really understand the other person's perspective? Ask questions to make sure you really do disagree. Try restating the other person's position before offering your own ''fact'' or ''opinion.'' Effective communicators are flexible; they recognize that they and another person may never agree on what the facts are, but in most cases they can respect each other's interpretation.

Interpersonal Barriers

Interpersonal barriers may exist between the speaker and listener—different values, difficult dealings in the past, or poor ''chemistry.'' The speaker's style or personality can turn people into poor listeners. If the person talks in a boring, unemotional tone of voice, others will tune out. If the speaker is someone who comes on as a ''know-it-all,'' listeners will also tune out. If you simply don't like the speaker, you might listen for just enough information to contradict that person and miss the point completely.

If this is happening, first acknowledge differences so that the message is not lost in the middle: ''I know we sometimes have different views of things, but let's see if we can find a way to help each other.''

Clarifying and mirroring can also make you and the speaker feel like you are part of a team, overcoming your differences for the good of the organization. Use ''we'' statements to foster a feeling of solidarity. Another way to break down interpersonal differences is to substitute ''I'' messages for ''you'' messages. ''You'' messages can sound accusatory or blaming: ''You don't follow my instructions.'' ''You'' statements often prevent communication because the listener is caught in an emotional trap, feeling accused or blamed. The statement, ''I hope my instructions were clear,'' can better promote communication, demonstrating that you are open to all possibilities of why things went wrong. ''I'' statements also leave other people with their dignity intact, even though the communication that follows may reveal that they need to make some improvements in performance or behavior. No one loses when communication is open to all possibilities. Respect and friendship can be retained by openly asking for ideas and opinions.

Distractions

If you're talking on the phone to a colleague who is explaining an important procedure and several people talk loudly as they walk past your cubicle, you will usually focus on the distraction rather than on the phone conversation.

Distractions can be mental or physical. Some examples of mental distractions are fear, worry, being unprepared, daydreaming, boredom, poor self-esteem, and anger. Sometimes, fatigue or poor health limits your ability to listen well. You may fully intend to devote all your attention to the other person, but your physical state won't allow it.

Physical distractions can include other people and outside noise. Telephones, and the perceived need to answer them, also make poor listeners of many people. Here are some questions to ask yourself when you note you are being distracted:

- Can you go somewhere else to avoid noise? Close a door or window to muffle it?
- Can someone else answer your phone for a few minutes? Are you in a public place where others can overhear? Is privacy important for this conversation?

Unless you do something to eliminate distractions, you are not likely to be able to get the speaker's full message.

Prejudging

Sometimes you may decide in advance what someone else is going to say—either positive or negative. Think of a situation in which you are sure you can predict what the other person will say, even before he or she has said a word. In these situations, you often end up hearing what you want or expect to hear. Closing your mind to a subject or an opinion blocks effective listening. Emotionally charged issues can bring about long discussions but very little listening. Avoid prejudging.

Ask neutral questions to clarify the other person's message. How do you feel about the speaker? Are you convinced he or she is wrong before saying a word? How will this affect what you hear? Try to imagine how you would react if another person were communicating the same message. What is the speaker's knowledge about the topic? Do you know? How important is the topic to you? To the speaker? To your company? Examine your own prejudices and keep an open mind.

Processing Speed

Most people think at a rate of around five hundred words a minute. The average person speaks at about 125 words a minute. Because of the gap between processing speed and talking speed, our minds tend to wander while others talk. So you have much ''room'' left over for considering other things—other work you have to do, phone calls to return, what to have for dinner, a bill you forgot to pay—some pressing priorities, some not so pressing.

Writing speed is even slower than speaking speed. Taking notes can help you focus your attention on what the speaker is saying. Resist letting your mind wander. Instead, use the extra time to listen better—process the information you are hearing by outlining the speaker's ideas, summarizing them, or categorizing them.

Organizational Barriers

Another important factor is organizational barriers—when someone has more power, status, or authority. For example, when you talk to your boss or people who report to you, you may encounter organization barriers. You may ignore what a new person says just because he or she is new (or inexperienced). On the other hand, you may ''freeze'' temporarily when your boss speaks to you.

Jobs also sometimes cause people to view situations differently. For example, most salespeople view paperwork as nonproductive. Accounting people value paperwork as something they need to create financial statements. These differences can create a barrier to communication.

If you're the boss, arrange settings that show you view the person as an equal, with a point of view you want to hear. If you are the employee or peer of the speaker, use reflective statements and other active listening techniques that indicate you think that you and the speaker are on the same level.

Physical Barriers. Physical barriers include floor plans that isolate people from each other. If employees in different departments must communicate often with each other, and they are on different floors, in different buildings, or in different cities, they must overcome a significant physical barrier to be sure their messages are received.

Listening also suffers when the environment works against communication. A room that is too hot or cold causes you to think more about the temperature than the speaker's words. Trying to listen to someone talk about a confidential matter in a crowded or noisy room creates challenges for both speaker and listener. Other physical barriers are wearing dark glasses or putting a desk between you and the speaker.

If the physical barrier is distance or structural (you're on one floor and a person you must work with is on another), see whether one of you can relocate, at least temporarily. Perhaps you can meet in a neutral location. If you are in your own office, sit next to the person, rather than put your desk between you. Take off your dark glasses so you and the speaker can make eye contact.

Gatekeepers. Gatekeepers, another barrier to communication, are filters people use when taking in information. There are three main gatekeepers: deletion, distortion, and generalization.

You *delete* when you leave out parts of a message the speaker is sending. For example, think of a meeting in which you were tuning in and out, letting your thoughts drift and missing much of what the speaker was saying. As a result, the words you did hear left you thinking, ''He doesn't really care about employees.'' Having heard only part of the message, you draw conclusions that may not be valid. Deletion is a problem when you hear only what you want to hear—either positive or negative—and ignore the rest.

Distortion is when you enlarge or diminish your experience. You look at it as in a mirror that distorts size and shape. For example, if you pass a co-worker in the hall and she doesn't speak, you might decide she was intentionally ignoring you. Without more information, that would be distortion.

Generalization is when you look at only certain aspects of a situation and build them into broader conclusions, ignoring the exceptions. For example, ''I can never get to sleep before 2:00 a.m.'' Chances are that you do get to sleep earlier. Generalization helps you respond to new situations based on previous experience, but it can be dangerous if you close off learning from new experiences.

Gatekeepers are also ways of responding to information, ideas, words, and even nonverbal signals. You've learned filters throughout your life—such as biases, experiences, and expectations. For example, someone may decide she doesn't like ''new jazz.'' She will use this as a filter to delete really listening to the music and generalize about all such music.

You can usually manage filters by first becoming aware of them, then acting to control or eliminate them. Think about the barriers you put up. Are any of them gatekeepers that keep you from listening to someone?

Effective listening involves good habits. Forming good habits requires awareness, practice, and sometimes the help of others. Understanding why people listen poorly will help you focus on creating better communication skills. One of the greatest barriers to communication is when people simply do not listen to each other. Communication is about give and take. You can always hold up your hand and say, ''Wait a minute. Can we backtrack so I can see if I understand you correctly?''

Consider difficulties you've had in communication. Were barriers involved? What effects did they have? How might you have resolved them? Use the form in Exhibit 18.5 to help you analyze barriers to communication.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

People communicate two ways—verbally and nonverbally. Both methods share information and reflect the relationship between the speaker and the listener. As long ago as 1971, Albert Mehrabian at UCLA conducted studies that indicated that, in situations that have an emotional component, body language and tone of voice can contribute as much as 90 percent of the communication of attitudes, while words contribute only 10 percent.

Exhibit 18.5 Analyze Barriers to Communication

Barrier	*Effects on My Communication*	*How I Might Resolve Them*
Hidden agenda		
Words		
Facts versus opinions		
Interpersonal differences		
Distractions		
Prejudging		
Speed differences		
Organizational		
Physical		
Deletion		
Distortion		
Generalization		

When there is a conflict between your words and your body language, most listeners will ''listen'' to the body language. And if the nonverbal message contradicts the verbal one, the nonverbal message wins nearly every time.

Verbal Messages. Verbal includes written and spoken messages. It refers to the words we use and how we speak them. For example, if a customer calls a company's office, the person answering the telephone might say, ''How can I help you?'' The words seem to indicate the person is ready to help the caller. On the other hand, depending on how the person answering the phone says the words, the customer could read the tone as:

- The call is welcome.
- The caller is interrupting.
- The person answering is attentive.
- The person answering is angry.
- The person answering considers the caller a ''pain.''

Indeed, how we use the words is often more important than the words themselves. Think about a recent conversation during which the inflection affected how you interpreted the other person's words.

Our jobs demand that, as consultants, we listen carefully to the whole message from clients, bosses, peers, subordinates, vendors, contractors, and even competitors. You must listen to your customers to ensure that your organization offers the best products or services. Active listening means the listener becomes involved in the communication process and takes on part of the responsibility to make sure he or she understands the message being sent.

The message received *is* the message. To ensure that you receive the message the speaker intended, monitor your own nonverbal communication and emotional filters. Try to put yourself in the speaker's position and glean the whole message by focusing on more than the words. Look for body language and tone as well to ascertain the whole message he or she is sending.

Nonverbal Messages. Nonverbal messages are often more powerful in communicating attitudes than words. They can signal whether or not you like the other person, your perception of your status or power in relation to the person, how responsive or attentive you are, and how accepting you are.

We communicate nonverbally in many ways: eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and posture. Examples of these are rolling eyes in disagreement, wringing of hands, tapping a foot or fingers, shaking or nodding the head, shrugging the shoulders, and leaning toward or away from the other person. Other nonverbal ways may be physical, such as touching—a handshake or a hand on the shoulder.

The distance between people is also a form of nonverbal communication. The term *proxemics*, introduced by anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1966), describes how distances between people affect the way they interact. Loosely stated, social or personal distance between people is reliably correlated with physical distance. When one person moves physically closer to another, he or she is indicating a closer personal relationship. Acceptable space varies between cultures, with Latin cultures comfortable being closer and Nordic cultures preferring more distance. You may find it hard to listen to someone if you are uncomfortable with his or her distance from you.

Silence, clothing, personal grooming, and even office furniture are other examples of nonverbals. Although little valid research has been done on these, everyone has a personal story about when each of these factors affected communication between them as consultant and their client. Nonverbal messages quickly convey acceptance, impatience, anxiety, agreement, disagreement, puzzlement, warm feelings, or discomfort, all without speaking one word.

Nonverbal language is not an exact science. You cannot be guaranteed that specific gestures always mean the same to all people. For example, when people sit with their arms folded, they may be indicating a closed attitude or simply that they are cold.

Your interpretations of body language are likely to be more accurate when you observe a person over a period of time, enabling you to correlate gestures with attitudes. When you sense negative attitudes in body language, modify your message. Back off, make your message milder, or stress the benefits to the listener. Keep modifying until the attitudes seem positive again. Of course, be mindful of your nonverbal messages as well. To enhance your verbal message:

- Make eye contact with the listener. (It's OK to glance away from time to time, but be sure to make eye contact again.)
- Speak in a pleasant tone of voice at a reasonable pace.
- Use positive facial expressions and body positions—smile, nod, and look alert and interested.
- Lean toward the other person.

Active listening is a process by which you listen attentively to the speaker, give signals that you are listening and understand what he or she is saying. People rarely agree with others just by getting more information; they are more likely to agree when they feel understood.

The process of active listening forces you to overcome barriers to respond correctly and effectively. Active listening does not mean that you agree with or unquestioningly support the speaker. It means paying attention to the words used and how the speaker delivers those words.

Active listening brings in your visual and emotional channels as well as the auditory senses. It involves four key techniques:

- Attending
- Restating and paraphrasing
- Asking questions
- Reflecting

Attending. Attending is giving the speaker signals that you are listening and that you understand what the speaker is saying. You do this in the following ways:

Eye Contact—Maintaining eye contact shows the speaker that you are interested in what the he or she is saying. Gazing into the distance, staring at the floor, or daydreaming shows a lack of interest and shuts down communication. The speaker then spends more time trying to get your attention and may lose track of the original message.

Oral Comments—Comments or questions that move the conversation along tell the speaker that you are listening. Uttering phrases such as ''Yes,'' ''Umhum,'' ''OK,'' ''I see,'' ''I understand,'' or ''How interesting,'' signals that you are paying attention (as long as your nonverbal signals match your comments). If you are busy shuffling papers, reading, or walking away, obviously the speaker will spot your insincerity.

Posture—Sitting back in a chair with arms folded and feet propped on the desk sends several signals. The person may be nonverbally saying, ''Go ahead, tell me something I don't already know!'' Or the posture may indicate boredom or a display of power. When a person leans forward, it can signal a willingness to pay attention. A person who sits on the corner of a desk and peers down at you also sends signals of power or superiority. A boss who invites you into the office for a meeting and then stands while talking generally indicates a short meeting. If he or she comes to your office, sits down, and draws the chair close to your desk, chances are the topic is important and the meeting could take a while. Adjust your posture to let the speaker know you are interested and willing to listen.

Gestures—Nodding your head in agreement or shaking it in disbelief shows the speaker you are listening. You can do the same by shrugging your shoulders or by tilting your head. Make your gestures consistent with the content of the message. If the speaker says, ''I think everyone agrees that we should go ahead with this new plan,'' and you nod your head, the speaker assumes you agree. If you disagree, you will be more effective if you frown slightly, shake your head, or tactfully state your opinion.

Restating and Paraphrasing. Active listening can include repeating or paraphrasing the content or feeling of the speaker's message as you understand it. To properly reflect the speaker's words, ideas, or feelings, you must listen. You can use the same words as the speaker: ''He's a great worker'' or paraphrase what is said: ''He's a great worker. You're impressed with his productivity.''

Asking Questions. Asking questions helps you get at the message ''between the lines.'' Short questions such as ''Really?'' or ''Is that so?'' work. Some good questions and comments that serve as door openers to encourage the speaker to keep talking are ''Tell me more about it'' ''I'd like to know what you're thinking about this'' ''Would you like to talk more?'' and ''Let's discuss it.''

Long questions that challenge or distract the speaker are not active listening. They may indicate Level 2 listening. Use either open-ended or close-ended questions to show you are listening. Open-ended questions are those that require a longer answer. They are usually seen as less threatening and ''good'' when you are trying to build a relationship as well as get information. For example, ''What happened at the meeting?'' is open-ended and sounds like the listener is ready to spend time with the speaker. Use the speaker's responses to form follow-up questions.

Closed-ended questions require short answers; sometimes one or two words are enough. ''Was Joe at the meeting?'' is closed-ended. These questions are more efficient in gathering information, but too many of them at one time take on the tone of an investigation instead of a conversation.

As long as we make comments or ask questions that keep the other person talking, we are still in the listening mode. If we comment or question in such a way that we threaten, challenge, criticize, or judge the other person, we are no longer listening.

Reflecting. Reflecting is tying into the emotion behind the words. It takes the most time and is the most powerful of all the active listening techniques. Use reflecting when you want to listen for relationship as well as for information.

You can reflect the feeling behind the statement. ''He's a great worker.''

''You enjoy having him on your team,'' reflects the speaker's feelings.

Reflection keeps the speaker talking. It signals that you are listening because you care about the speaker, the topic, or both. It shows you're not listening just to challenge or criticize.

Consider how reflecting only the content keeps the following conversation friendly and helpful.

SPEAKER: ''I'm really excited about my new job.''

LISTENER: ''You have a new job.''

SPEAKER: ''Yes, and I've already learned how to use the word processing and spread sheet packages.''

LISTENER: ''You're really into this computer business!''

SPEAKER: ''And how! Not only does it save me money, it has already paid for itself by allowing me to take on a project I would never have been able to complete on time with just a typewriter.''

LISTENER: ''You're really getting your money's worth from your investment.''

SPEAKER: ''Best money I ever spent.''

The following example reflects the content and the feeling.

SPEAKER: ''I can't wait until they've completed that new house behind us.''

LISTENER: ''You're not too happy with the construction going on in your neighborhood.''

SPEAKER: ''Yeah, I wish they'd pack up their tools and go home.''

LISTENER: ''You're really upset with that project.''

SPEAKER: ''And how! Every morning at 7:00 sharp they start their incessant banging and sawing and drilling and chattering. They drive me nuts.''

LISTENER: ''Their early starts really disturb you.''

SPEAKER: ''Normally, I wouldn't even be at home so I wouldn't care. But just last Monday, I was put on the midnight shift at work. I can't get any sleep with all that noise.''

Notice how the real problem did not surface until the speaker reflected three times. Only then did the listener understand why the speaker became so upset at the new home building project. Here are a few samples of reflections of both feeling and content:

You're ____________ because ____________.

You feel ____________ about____________.

You seem____________ with____________.

Using neutral comments lets you learn more about a situation before committing yourself to a position. Active listening also creates time to cool off when emotions might be heated. While the other person speaks, you can use your ''think speed'' to decide how involved you want to get with the other person or the situation he or she is describing.

When you know you receive the whole message the speaker intends, you can plan a better response. Clear responses let the speaker know that the message was clear—or that he or she needs to revise it to make it clear.

Many people overlook good ideas because they do not focus on the speaker, preferring to spend the time composing their next comment. By listening closely to the speaker, the listener often gets good ideas or can respond to work with the speaker to build better ideas.

For example, the marketing director in a telecommunication company was discussing the appointment of yet another president (the third in two years). ''I'm willing to give him a chance,'' she said. ''At least when you talk with him, you feel you've been heard. That's some improvement.''

Active listening also lets you show the speaker that you care about what he or she is saying. It also puts you on the same level as the speaker, which can lead the speaker to recognize you as a co-equal, or at least in a higher status position than before.

Think of the people who are known to be ''good listeners.'' Now think about who usually gets recognition for good ideas. Are they the same people? They are in many organizations.

In the 1920s, a salesman for a Procter & Gamble was taking a train from Kansas City to St. Louis when he was engaged in conversation by a salesman for a rival company. With only a little encouragement, the man couldn't stop talking about the new ''flaked'' soap the company was introducing. The P&G representative got off at the next station and wired the company, which sped up its introduction of Ivory Snow. It quickly cornered the market while the rival Palmolive Beads languished in a distant second place. P&G told the story to new recruits for years to admonish them to protect company secrets, but it is also an excellent example of the potential benefits of active listening.

Sometimes just attending to what the other person is saying will give you valuable information. In other situations, a few reflecting questions will do the trick. Either technique should help you determine quickly whether the speaker's message is of real value to you.

Properly practiced, active listening lets you place the responsibility where it belongs: on the speaker. If the speaker has a problem, you can help by being a sounding board, but not necessarily by taking on unwanted tasks. If you are the one who must take action, active listening helps you ensure that you clearly understand what is expected. Exhibit 18.6 provides a summary of the main points.

Exhibit 18.6 How to Be a Better Listener

Speaker's Responsibility

- Know the listener—tailor the message to the listener's point of view. you don't have to agree with the speaker; just try to understand what he or she is saying.
- Check your volume, speed, and clarity.
- If the listener gives no feedback, ask for it.
- Become a good listener.
- Sharpen your observation skills. Do the words match the nonverbal clues?

Listener's Responsibility

- Know your purpose: What do you want in this situation?
- Be sensitive to the speaker's language, but don't let words you consider ''loaded'' interfere with your job as a listener.
- Check out the emotional content (feeling).
- Listen actively.
- Attend to the speaker.
- Restate or paraphrase the speaker's words.
- Reflect the speaker's emotions.
- Give feedback.
- Concentrate on the message; don't drift.
- Retain the important points.
- Use verbal and nonverbal cues to show that you are listening.
- Don't interrupt or finish the other person's sentences.
- Sharpen your observation skills.
- We listen with our ears, our hearts, our minds, our eyes, and our mouths.

HANDLING RESISTANCE

As Peter Block notes in *Flawless Consulting*, if a client tells you he thinks you're way off the mark, it's not resistance. In the real world, performance improvement consultants may have difficulty identifying the precise type of resistance. They usually just need to know whether the resistance is from lack of knowledge, an inability to adapt, feelings of being threatened, or a belief that proposed solutions lack value. While being alert to a client's resistance, be aware of your own uncertainties. Is the client truly resisting, or is he or she picking up on your own fears?

Once you are convinced the client is resisting you or your information, Block advises that you first try to understand it. At its heart, resistance is an emotional reaction, and a major cause is fear of the unknown. So despite your clear, compelling presentation, the client may be unable to accept any change. An unpleasant, known situation is often preferable to the unknown.

1. Identify the resistance through verbal and non-verbal cues. You may need more than one meeting to confirm your belief that the client is resisting you.
2. Look for other reasons. Is it really resistance or a difference in styles? Respond as though there is no resistance.
3. If the client continues to resist, let the client talk. The problem may be that he or she wants to make sure you understand the problem. Use active listening skills to uncover underlying concerns.
4. Name the resistance in neutral language. Or deal with it through questions.
5. Be quiet and let the client talk.
6. Listen to your own thoughts and feelings.
7. Don't take it personally.
8. Give two good faith responses.
9. If necessary, renegotiate or escalate.

Identify the Type of Resistance

Peter Block has an excellent list of the types of resistance a consultant might encounter. In the early 1990s shortly after reading the first edition of *Flawless Consulting*, the author was so impressed that she tried identifying resistance with nearly every client she met. The truth is, resistance was less common than she assumed. The result was confusion on the part of several clients. The lesson here is that, until you are experienced in the process, stop and think before jumping to conclusions.

Table 18.1 lists the types of resistance that Block identified, when a client may not be resisting, and how to test. In some situations, you may need to name the resistance.

Clients often resist because they do not feel understood. Simply saying ''I understand'' may be more of an irritant than a help. You must first indicate who is resisting (the client), how he or she is showing the resistance, and what you need if you are to understand. Naming the resistance involves reflective listening and frequent use of ''you'' statements.

Table 18.1 Identifying Types of Resistance

Type of Resistance	*Might Not Be Resistance If*	*You Can Test by*
Asking for more detail	The client is asking reasonable questions. Some performance improvement practitioners jump to conclusions very quickly and a request for detail may indicate that the client isn't comfortable with your conclusions or the approach you are taking. The client is more detail-oriented than you are. Conflicts can often occur between ''detail'' and ''big picture'' individuals when the latter doesn't give the former enough detail. (The opposite is also true. Detail types may flood big picture people with information.)	In the first or second meeting, assume the questions are true requests for information. If the client asks for increasingly detailed information, it might signal resistance. Review previous meetings in your own mind. Did the client ask for information or raise concerns you haven't addressed? Ask the client if you are missing something. ''I will look further into this area. Is there something in particular you think I'm missing?'' Evaluate whether there might be a style difference. If you think the client wants more detail than you normally provide, can you negotiate a compromise?
Flooding you with detail	Again consider style differences. You may think the client is flooding you with detail, he or she may believe it is important information to the project.	Try to find out whether the client is always so detail minded. Unless you think the ''flood'' is holding up progress, a little patience may be the best solution. If you think the details are unrelated (or barely related) to the project, say ''You are giving me a lot of information, I

(*continued*)

		am having a little trouble connecting it all to the project we're discussing. Might this mean a bit more in a few days (weeks/months/years)?
No time	The client really has no interest in the project. Trying to push a client into a project is a poor way to get started	Ask direct questions, such as ''Is this project something we should postpone?'' Busy businesspeople are often unaware of the effect of their behavior. A direct question will open a discussion on the project. If the client's priorities have truly shifted, you may be better off to delay it for a while.
Impracticality	Your ideas may be outside the client's comfort zone.	Ask the client just which ideas he or she views as impractical and validate against your own understanding of the client's work culture. Consider whether your ideas will work and propose potential compromises.
Attacking	The client deals with everyone this way.	In low-risk situations, be assertive—let the client know what you'll accept or not accept. (See the discussion on assertion later in this chapter.)
Silence	While silence does not mean agreement, it is not necessarily a sign of disagreement. The silence might also be a sign of style differences. Some people think through situations in full sentences before responding; others often don't know what they think until they've said it!	Wait for the client to respond, and then evaluate the response. If the client is being unduly passive, consider the situation. Practice patience.
Theorizing	Some people just like to talk and can expand on almost any topic. With some of those who seem to go on forever, the talk may turn to theorizing.	Let the person talk for a bit, but try to bring the conversation back to the situation at hand with a comment such as ''You seem to have an expansive knowledge in

(*continued*)

Table 18.1 Continued

Type of Resistance	*Might Not Be Resistance If*	*You Can Test by*
		this field. I know our time is limited, so I am hoping to get in a few questions on some specifics.'' Then follow up with real questions.
Methodology	You are using outdated techniques or you have recommended a methodology or other methods that strike the client as unproven.	First, get specifics and clarify the client's objections. Then ask yourself whether your methodology is outdated or too new for the client's comfort level. Can you achieve valid results with the client's choices? Will learning new technology help you in the future?
Disappearing problem	The problem was misdiagnosed and is no longer an issue. Another possibility is that new problems have arisen than are more important to the client.	Unless you are sure this is a form of resistance or you have a very open relationship with him or her, accept the client's decision. Otherwise, you might appear to be a solution looking for a problem.
Pressing for solutions	The client is genuinely frustrated. Have you missed key delivery dates? Are there unexplained delays? Sometimes the problem is not client impatience but consultant tardiness.	If you know you've met all your deadlines, ask the client if something has changed in his or her area. Perhaps the client has been handed new demands. Ask, ''You seem to want the dates moved forward. What was wrong with our original schedule?''

Handle Resistance Assertively

As with all relationships, small misunderstandings left untended can balloon into big problems. It is difficult, if not impossible, to read others' emotions and thoughts, but observing their behaviors and choosing the right behavior yourself will help you navigate even the most difficult situation. A useful model is one involving assertive, aggressive, non-assertive and passive-aggressive behaviors.

Assertion is a behavior that lets people express their thoughts, feelings, and values about a situation openly and directly while maintaining regard for the other person. Aggression is when one stands up for his or her own rights but ignores the rights of others. Non-assertive behavior occurs when one ignores his or her own rights and allows others to infringe on them. Passive-aggressive behavior is when one complies with the wishes of others but resents them and acts to subvert the original intent.

Assertive Behavior. Assertive behavior is important in consulting relationships because consultants often do not know the other person's wants and needs. By speaking honestly and tactfully, the consultant stands up for his or her own rights while recognizing those of others. An assertive approach helps build mutual respect, strengthen relationships, and create a perception of decisiveness. The negative side of assertion is that sometimes people will view the person acting assertively as too independent or even pushy.

Aggressive Behavior. If people are not careful, what they perceive in themselves as assertiveness may be seen by others as *aggression*. Monitor you own intentions. Aggressive individuals feel they always have to win and make decisions that do not consider the rights or views of others. You may think you are being persuasive and passionate about your cause; others may think you are single-minded, inflexible, and unwilling to compromise. Some signs of aggressive behavior include interrupting others, using sarcasm, and being condescending by pointing out small mistakes.

Non-Assertive Behavior. *Non-assertive* behavior occurs when an individual does not state his or her own needs, ideas, or feelings. The person may be overly concerned about the other person's rights to the extent that he or she foregoes some or all of his or her own rights to express ideas or influence events. One is acting non-assertively if his or her behavior includes over-accommodation, being too apologetic, and using self-putdowns. Some ways these could be reflected in the consulting relationship are

- *Being overly accommodating*—There is a line between being responsive and overly accommodating. Answering a client's questions quickly is responsive. Turning one's schedule upside down is not.
- *Being too apologetic*—A brief apology for being late to a meeting along with a brief explanation is appropriate. Long explanations just make the person sound defensive.
- *Putting oneself down*—What one person perceives as self-deprecating humor, others may see as lack of confidence.

Because one's actions and words are rarely in accord with their actions and words when he or she is non-assertive, the result is often suppressed anger and resentment. Such emotions are bound to surface eventually, severely damaging the relationship. If left unchecked, non-assertion can lead to passive-aggressive behavior.

Passive-Aggressive Behavior. This sort of behavior occurs when, rather than express negative feelings openly, one expresses them indirectly and often negatively. People who are passive-aggressive are often seen as complying with the requests of others, sometimes even enthusiastically so. Then they may not follow through or deliver only part of what they promised. Consultants often complain about clients not meeting their commitments. The client may be extremely busy, having second thoughts, or simply avoiding dealing with a situation. The consultant's response should be to deal with this behavior as a form of resistance.

Communicate Assertively

To succeed, you need to be able to state your needs in an assertive, constructive way. In fact, there are times and situations in which assertiveness is critical for consultants.

During the contracting phase, one example of assertiveness is to explain the benefits of an approach while being prepared to discuss any limitations. The client needs to own the approach as much as or more than the consultant, and he or she cannot do that with less-than-full information. Be sure to also indicate the importance of both sides meeting their responsibilities. For example, you will want to indicate the seriousness of missed deadlines.

During the consultation, the consultant must take the lead in informing the client about progress and any problems that arise. To communicate assertively, you need to tell the other person how his or her behavior affects you and offer a solution and closing statement. For example, assume your client had promised you access to plant supervisors so you could ask them about why they think absenteeism has recently soared. You might say ''Without access to the plant supervisors, I am concerned that my report will be incomplete. I have some free time on Wednesday and Thursday. Which day do you think would be more convenient?'' The key is to focus on ultimate outcomes rather than on mistakes made by the client or others.

Deal with Others' Behavior

Dealing with assertive behavior is simply a matter of responding to the other person's statements and behaviors. The difficulty arises when the other person appears to be behaving aggressively, non-assertively, or passive-aggressively.

Aggressive Behavior. Aggressive behavior may be a sign of resistance or a deliberate style to put others on the defensive. It is fairly easy to detect. The other person's speech is faster, louder, and more demanding than usual. He or she may give the impression that your rights don't matter. The best response depends on the risks present in the situation. In a low-risk situation, when you are sure the other person is unaware of his or her behavior and its effect on you, an assertive response would be appropriate.

If, however, the other person is obviously angry and you perceive the risk to be moderate to high, become more passive. Become quiet and monitor your own emotions. Breathe through your nose and assess what action would be appropriate. Speak quietly and more slowly.

1. Calmly acknowledge the behavior.
2. Use assertive communication. Describe the effect the behavior is having on you and on the discussion.
3. Determine whether it's possible to continue constructive conversation.
4. Suggest a way to focus on the work issue.
5. Express support and reassurance.

Sometimes aggressiveness takes the form of rudeness. The person has learned that rudeness often results in compliance by others and may even think it speeds processes.

- Watch your language—four letter words and sarcasm add fuel to the fire.
- Avoid responding in kind— rudeness sparks more rudeness.
- Get in control of yourself—breathe deeply and take a time out, if necessary.
- Manage your anger by stating your own emotions: ''I'm angry because . . . .''
- Deal with the effect of the other person's behavior on you: ''When you play the radio so loudly in your cubicle, I can't talk to customers.''
- Escalate to your boss, the other person's boss, or HR—as a last resort.

Non-Assertive Behavior. Clients can display non-assertive behavior through silence or compliance. They may want to avoid an unpleasant situation, such as being unhappy with your work or having to deliver bad news about difficulties with a project. It may be that the client is having difficulty accepting his or her own responsibility for the problem. When you are dealing with non-assertive behavior:

- *Draw the other person out with gentle questioning*—Most clients have no problem with telling a consultant he or she is on the wrong track, but they find it difficult to acknowledge their own responsibility.

- *Offer praise when appropriate*—You may find it difficult to have to reassure a client that he or she is doing a good job, but this may be the only way to encourage the other person to open up.
- *Watch the client's responses*—Non-assertive behavior is either a sign that the other person feels very uncomfortable or an indicator that he or she has no intention of cooperating with you. Peter Block refers to the latter situation as ''consulting with a stone'' (2000, p. 138). Such situations rarely end happily. You would be wise to remove yourself from the project.

Passive-Aggressive Behavior. Sometimes we think a person is passive-aggressive when there are other explanations for his or behavior. For example, if someone didn't follow through on a request or we feel he or she betrayed us, our adrenalin surges and we feel an urge to get revenge. Resist the feeling until you can be sure it is passive-aggressiveness. Two situations often viewed as passive-aggressive are when co-workers fail to follow through or when they seem to betray you.

When Someone Doesn't Follow Through

- Did something prevent him from keeping his word? Most people take pride in honoring their commitments. If this is the first time the person has failed to follow through, assume he had some kind of emergency or heavy demands from the boss.
- Did she make the promise too quickly? Sometimes people agree to take on tasks before they realize the scope of the commitment. To avoid such situations, be sure to give the other person the whole picture.
- Is he a guy who just can't say ''no''? Non-assertive people often agree to all tasks because they don't think they have the right to say ''no.'' Confirm that he has time, interest, and commitment for the task you've requested. You may need to negotiate to help the person meet all his obligations.
- Did she really intend not to keep her word? People rarely make commitments when they have no intention of honoring them. If you are convinced that this is the case, you are probably dealing with true passive-aggressive behavior. The following actions will help:
  - *Document everything*—The author was meeting with the manager of a group she was going to lead in a planning session. Her custom at the time was to tape all meetings for note-taking purposes. The manager had some specific goals she wanted the group to achieve and outlined them to the author. When the author included the goals in her preliminary outline, the manager denied ever discussing them. The author apologized and said she'd recheck her tape to see where she'd

misunderstood the conversation. The manager immediately dropped the subject.

- *Avoid meeting alone*—If you have to meet alone, consider recording the meeting. Of course, all parties agree to the recording in advance. If the other person objects or raises questions of trust, explain that you can't always trust your own memory or handwriting. Taping ensures that you don't have to interrupt the other person while you update your notes.
- *Surface issues in public*—Express your concern as one of understanding. Remind yourself that you are just trying to ''make the invisible visible.'' Be very careful to keep a neutral tone and use assertive, reflective statements as appropriate.

- Keep trusting others—don't taint other relationships because of one bad one.

When You Feel Betrayed

- Stifle the impulse toward revenge. People who betray you have probably done it to others as well. Act like the rational adult you are, and resist spreading rumors.
- Try to talk to the other person—privately and calmly. Focus on how the person's behavior affected you. ''When you denied saying you would call the client, I felt (betrayed/let down/disappointed/hurt) because my memory of the conversation is so clear.'' Then give specific facts to support your statement. If the other person acknowledges your version, follow up the understanding in an e-mail with copies to others who attended the meeting.
- Try to let go of the grudge—it only lets the other person keep winning. Forget, even if you can't forgive.

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

The key to maintaining agreements or relationships is follow-up. Performance improvement practitioners often excel at attracting business, but they then skimp on the follow-up with the client. Often, they think the work should speak for itself and that ''client handholding'' is a distraction. In fact, successful practitioners know that maintaining the relationship is just as important as the substantive work.

Key activities in managing agreements include:

- *Stay in touch*—Decide on a method that works well for you and your client. You should agree on the following points:

  - *Frequency of updates*—Revisit the frequency issue from time to time. Clients often want more frequent updates early in a project and then require them less often. There is no need to provide updates the client feels are unnecessary.
  - *How the client wants to be updated*—Is an e-mail sufficient or are more formal methods needed?
  - *Reporting in*—Does the client want to know every time you are on the premises? Is prior approval required?
- *Follow through with follow-up*—If you promise a deliverable, deliver it.
- *Be consistent*—Project updates can be tedious and time-consuming. Consider the level of commitment you offer and plan to maintain that level throughout the engagement.
- *Use integrity*—It is possible to recover from most mistakes when consulting on performance improvement projects. On the other hand, a lack of integrity is the one type of situation clients find hard to accept. Maintain your good reputation, even if you must occasionally admit mistakes or take responsibility for less-than-perfect outcomes.
- *Look for win-win interactions*—

A few rules help the consultant ensure collaboration with the client:

- *View others as they are*—It's hard enough to change yourself; you can't change others.
- *Recognize differences in personal working style*—Some people have neat desks. Others operate amid stacks. Either can do a good job.
- *Treat others as they want and need to be treated*—This is the platinum rule of successful relationships.
- *Remember that different is not the same as stupid*—Differences can lead to stronger solutions.
- *Consider results, not processes*—Some people know intuitively where they can cut a corner or two, while others are lost if they don't follow a process precisely. Of course, you needn't accept inferior work, but recognize that there is often more than one valid way to complete an assignment.
- *Own your own feelings*—Consider your intent, and recognize when it has changed.
- *Acknowledge your own wants and needs*—Remember, you have a right to succeed.
- *Identify underlying client concerns*—Most fear losing control. Your role is to help them through what is often a difficult time.

Exhibit 18.7 My Personal SWOT Analysis

Strengths: List technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills. Identify other types of value you might add (languages, art, etc.) not commonly found in your field.

Weaknesses: Identify areas where you are weak, including technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills.

Opportunities: What opportunities do you seek? What ones are currently open to you?

Threats: What technological trends work against you? What is your competition doing?

Complete the SWOT analysis in Exhibit 18.7 after reviewing the principles presented in this chapter.

References

1. Block, P, (2000). *Flawless consulting* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
2. Marquis, H. (2008). The three keys to ITIL success. Retrieved July 28, 2008, from itsmwatch.com.
3. Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.
4. Schein, E. H. (1999). *Process consultation revisited*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.