

Consulting in Organisations

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Personal construct consulting in organisations requires the translation of George Kelly's 2-volume work on *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (Kelly, 1955) out of the clinical context of 1950's middle America into the organisational context of the 21st century global workplace, while simultaneously fast-forwarding the language through 60 years of changing attitudes and sensibilities. While that is a considerable undertaking, it is not as difficult as it sounds. Specific examples from the text may raise our eyebrows from time to time, but the core theory is one of the most valuable and comprehensive guides to the complexities of organisational practice.

This chapter sets out some of Kelly's starting points for the helping professional - in his case a psychotherapist or clinician, in mine a consultant. All my references to his work are drawn from his core 2-volume text. In direct quotes I have simply substituted "consultant" and "consulting" for "therapy" and "therapist". PCP is not, fundamentally, about therapy and was not derived from clinical assumptions. Kelly chose the clinical setting as the world where he could immerse himself most comprehensively in the construing of others, but his work is about all of us, all of the time.

Where to begin?

When I first read Kelly, two ideas immediately stood out: firstly that organisations are not entities - "abandoned monuments" - but are ongoing events on a huge scale; and secondly that no-one need be completely hemmed in by circumstances or become "a victim of their biography" since there are always alternative ways to construe our situation and what happens in the world around us.

At the time, I was working in a very large organisation with a group of consultants who did indeed construe organisations as entities. Locating themselves as 'objective outsiders' they believed that organisations could be studied, analysed and subsequently engineered for change, and over 30 years later I would still see this as the dominant approach. Groups we consulted with were indeed feeling hemmed in by the circumstances of their working lives,

and alternatives were in short supply in settings where the most usual response to the threats and anxieties of change was a tightening of practices and procedures. The consulting team were continually frustrated by 'resistance' seeing this as a major obstacle to overcome in any project, and my own experiments with process consulting had not made much impact, largely because I lacked a robust theoretical framework to underpin such methods.

In this context, PCP was radical, refreshing and above all useful. Here at last was a theory that assumed intelligent movement and suggested many practical ways to work with it. It challenged the consulting role to the core:

- what difference would it make to see the organisation as an ongoing web of interaction, in motion even as we were trying to examine it?
- how would our practice change if we understood each person as an inquiring scientist, and their behaviour as a series of interesting experiments derived from the questions they were trying to answer?
- as obstacles and difficulties arose, what varied meanings were people making of events, and what might happen if we foregrounded their diverse ways of seeing?
- and how differently might we intervene if we saw resistance to change as sensible and meaningful, as useful data to be understood and worked with rather than a problem to overcome?

Here was a theory about the struggles of human change, expressed not as dogmatic rules which would lead us to straightforward answers, but as questions, as provocations, as a checklist of things to be curious about and to work on together, located within the clients' world of meanings rather than in textbook templates of how things should be.

As an approach, PCP is strong on core theory and philosophical foundations while being relatively open and non-prescriptive about method, freeing us to create and shape a practice in line with its core assumptions. It does have some unique and valuable methods but they are not the essence. A PCP consultant is therefore less likely than many to arrive in an organisation armed with a preferred vision, a manualised toolkit, or a bank of solutions based on organisational ideals, and more likely to focus on how this particular group are currently going about their business, where they are heading, what they are anticipating, and why all this is important to them.

So, if we are not arriving with product - with pre-determined solutions or ideals - where might a PCP consultant begin? At the start of his second volume, having outlined his philosophy and theory at very considerable length in the preceding book, Kelly begins his exploration of practice. We might expect to be given some definition of terms and of our role and purpose. We might hope for formulae to apply as we move out into the world of practice intervention. That's not what we get. Translated into our terms, what we are offered, most helpfully, are three key questions:

What does consulting mean to the client?
What is the client's initial conceptualisation of the consultant?
How does the consultant construe their role?

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this as a starting point.

What does consulting mean to the client?

Kelly points out that the client's initial request will reveal much about what they believe can be accomplished, and by exclusion what can't, and this will be our starting point. He offers an interesting range of hypotheses about how clients may construe the consulting process.

I've added my interpretation to his headlines:

as an end in itself: a routine box to be ticked during any significant change, or a generally accepted good thing that will reap some reward;

as confirmation of difficulties: to endorse the client's own constructions through providing 'objective' data, perhaps showing that problems are insurmountable or that other systems need to change;

as achieving a fixed state of mind: finding explanations and solutions, and acquiring rules and doctrines to hold on to in an unstable world;

as a means of altering circumstances: to re-engineer systems or re-structure the environment without clients needing to change themselves;

as drastic movement within the present system: to transform to the contrast pole of how things are now, without challenging the actual constructs currently in play;

as clarification of issues: with the consultant as listener, reflector or sounding-board, to reduce confusion and help focus on concerns and priorities;

as an environment for imminent change: where things are already on the move and the client is looking for a holding function, and for ways to support, manage and learn from what is happening;

or *as a state of passivity*: in cases when asking for help is "so demoralising that the client is partly or wholly incapacitated by it" seeing the need for assistance as destructive of their professional integrity.

We are encouraged to consider what might be inferred from how clients talk about having problems or difficulties, and to explore what the contrast might be in their terms. And we are reminded that contemporaneous requests may have similarities since “complaints appear to grow on the vines of contemporary discourse”.

At the end of his list, Kelly makes the point that, while some client anticipations may present special problems, they are not problems in themselves. Clients are simply what they are, “*and if they had a perfect outlook on everything we would be out of a job*”. If we are to help them, we need to understand their own constructions of change and the process they believe they are embarking on. “*It is neither necessary nor possible for the client to have an adequate notion*” of what will entail, but by understanding more of the client’s initial construing we can “*discover what it is we are accepting as a point of departure*” for our work together.

The attempt to subsume our clients’ constructions does not imply that we adopt their ways of seeing, or that we necessarily approve of or agree with them. It is simply that we understand their constructions as the raw material we are working with. We join the client’s world; we do not invite them as temporary visitors to our own. Seen from their perspective, we expect our clients’ construing to make coherent sense, however problematic they may be finding things at the point of calling us in. Our task is to begin to understand specifically what kind of sense they are making, to identify what is core to them, to discover both the potential for movement that might currently exist and the possibility for innovation in new directions.

What I most appreciate about being offered this selection of questions and options is the way we are continually prompted to explore, to pay attention, to find out, and not to ‘know’. Questions are invaluable, they keep us awake.

What is the client’s initial conceptualisation of the consultant?

This second question is reiterated in two further ways: “*In what role is the client now casting me?*” and “*What are the variations in this conceptualisation of me?*”. As Kelly suggests, these are not always easy questions to answer.

He provides us again with a range of alternatives to consider including the possibilities of the consultant being construed as *parent*, as *protector*, as *absolver of guilt*, as *authority figure*, as *prestige figure*, as a *possession*, as a *stabiliser*, as a *temporary respite*, as a *threat*, as an *ideal companion*, and as a *stooge* or *foil*. There is much food for thought here, and we are encouraged to be alert to all these possibilities and to the practice implications of the variety of roles we may be invited to adopt.

A further way in which the client may construe the consultant is as a “*representative of reality*” or *validator*. Consulting is a kind of relational laboratory in which experiments in

reconstruction can be tried out in manageable scale, and where the consultant and client might jointly determine the predictive efficiency of plans and proposals. Kelly suggests that *“it takes a pretty negativistic consultant to fail to be helpful when approached in this manner”* yet he acknowledges that some of us will indeed fail, usually by insisting on our own knowledge and authority rather than engaging in a genuinely cooperative experimental relationship.

And that feels like the heart of the issue. We are there to work with our clients on their change, attentive to what is emerging and curious about what might happen next. We are engaged in the field of possible futures, and our work will be experimental in the same way as our clients. Kelly described the ideal professional-to-client relationship as something like a PhD supervisor-to-student, and although he was thinking of one-to-one work in choosing that metaphor it serves well for our purposes. The doctoral student will by definition be breaking new ground with original research and while the supervisor may have great expertise in related fields and in the processes of research and learning they have not travelled the path the student is taking. Consultants similarly may have much experience of organisational life and considerable depth of understanding of change and transition but we are not experts on any particular client's organisation - they are.

The other feature of the 'cooperative experimental' relationship is that it will unfold in time. Possibilities develop through exploratory interactions and there will be limits to the amount of structured planning that will be possible in advance. This can be a stark contrast to much mainstream consulting practice which favours structural solutions and adopts standardised project planning methodologies. A genuinely interactive development process will involve periods of uncertainty and troubling complexity, and these states are not easy to handle in the majority of organisations where decisive confidence is highly prized. The art of a PCP consultant will be to generate a good-enough framework for the client to feel confident enough to commit to the process while leaving maximum space for ideas, plans and solutions to emerge as we work together. Our relatively loose openness to possibility will need to be just-tight-enough for our clients' needs.

Understanding how clients are construing our role during the course of our intervention will have the added advantage of enabling us to locate people, within the organisation and beyond, who might play similar roles in the future, lessening dependency on consultants over time. From the moment we join this organisation-in-motion we are setting the stage for a continuous process of development, with an eye for potential which might open up long after our formal contact ends.

How does the consultant construe their role?

According to Kelly, the job of anyone working with PCP is to assist in the continuous shifting of construct systems. Continuous, since PCP understands human systems as processes of change in themselves, and sees the maintenance of health and well-being as

being dependent on paths of ready movement being continually open and available. Our construction of our role will therefore be based in how we work with change, and rather than the dynamic-sounding 'change agent' of organisational development literature, we are cast as something less centre-stage: an 'assistant' to our clients. In Kelly's exploration of how we might conceptualise this role of change facilitation, we are again given many useful angles to consider.

The process of change

Firstly, we are encouraged to see change in terms of activity and performance and not as located in concepts, plans or tools. The philosophy and theory of PCP are the foundation for the consultant's work rather the content of it. While some theoretical models may be useful to share with our clients, our focus will largely be on promoting activity. The guiding metaphor is that of person-as-scientist, with experimentation as our mode of inquiring into what might be possible and our way of learning about what might work.

Kelly reminds us of the potential power of small changes. These may not be life-changing, but when any pattern is disrupted, new possibilities will ensue. To promote experimentation, he mentions the value of

highlighting threat, by demonstrating ways in which the organisation's capacity to anticipate has become compromised, and drawing attention to the risks involved;

highlighting invalidation, by noting replicated patterns which would suggest that both anticipations and actions are failing to achieve desired outcomes;

and *generating scenarios*, precipitating people into the kinds of situations where it will become more apparent that habitual ways of construing are not effective.

The more common practice of provoking experiments through exhortation to change is given a rather elegant working-over in Kelly's chapter. He notes that the client can do no more than attempt change within the confines of their existing construct systems and we may therefore be very surprised by the results. Their apparent failure to convert our carefully developed material into appropriate action must be understood as a failure of our own: we have not found or developed an adequate psychological framework for the client within which our ideas can be handled meaningfully.

Significant change will involve the elaboration and/or revision of constructs and construing processes. We will be attending to the organisation as a whole (its ongoing purpose and priorities, and the pattern of explicit and implicit codes and behaviours that characterise its everyday life), its sub-systems (the micro-cultures of groups, teams or sections with their own priorities and specific practices), and the personal construct systems of individuals. We will be exploring meaning-making at each level, considering the 'fit' between them, and

assessing the tendencies and potential for movement in terms of both the organisation's own aspirations and challenges and the context of their broader operating environment.

The Fundamental Postulate applies: that "*people's processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which they anticipate events*". Individuals, teams and networks scan their environment, gathering data, making sense of it in their own various ways, and moving forward according to the sense they make. The ongoing life of the organisation, in terms of both its superordinate trajectory and its everyday behaviours, is the experimental outcome of the anticipatory processes of its members. The consultant offers a 'subsuming' construct system, a structure of theoretical understandings and professional practices within which to explore and experiment.

A conversational approach

Kelly's language of elaborating and revising construct systems may sound technical, but in practice much work is progressed through initiating and managing conversations. PCP is a relational practice which understands change as located in the ongoing activities and conversational life of organisations-in-process. We will be observing conversations, joining them, facilitating them, re-locating them, disturbing them, provoking them. We may often act as interpreters, validating diverse contributions and reflecting or reframing them to enable people to hear each other without the overlay of habit. We will be considering the relative coherence between strategic plans, core values and behavioural activity, and will highlight discrepancies not as problems to resolve necessarily but as important tensions, 'live' issues worth paying attention to and becoming curious about.

We will develop a keen ear for the necessary polarities of organisational life as they arise in conversation and argument. These may include constructs such as security v risk; people v profit; strategy v operations; planning v reacting; change v stability; central v local; control v freedom; public v private; hierarchy v participation; short-term v long-term. We will want to find out what these things mean specifically, why they are important, and how they are enacted. Rather than opposing positions to be taken, we would construe these contrasts as representing the lively dynamics of organisational decision-making, dimensions of movement requiring fluid and deft manoeuvre between the poles.

Our core tools then will be credulous listening, attention to contrasts, questioning up to values and beliefs, questioning down to examples and descriptors, trying ideas on for size, and engaging with all feedback as useful data. In combination, these basic components of PCP are the toolkit for the critical conversational practice that is at the heart of consulting. They are rooted in the primacy of working creatively and respectfully with others and accepting the internal validity and coherence of their differing points of view, while seeking and valuing alternative constructions and managing uncertainty and paradox.

Theory in practice

Kelly's Fundamental Postulate leads to a number of theoretical corollaries which also guide our understanding:

- each person will be choosing ways forward that make the most viable sense given their current take on the situation (*choice*);
- there will be similarities of construction (*commonality*) and differences (*individuality*) across teams, functions and levels as well as between individuals;
- the effectiveness of relationships will be determined by the extent to which people are prepared to understand each other's meaning-making (*sociality*);
- collectively, there may be a tendency towards variation and permeability, or towards fixed and closed meanings (*modulation*);
- there will be varying degrees of accommodation or tension between between the professional values and objectives of different functional groups, and between sub-groups and teams who generate oppositional meanings (*fragmentation*);
- the constructs currently in play may have wide or restricted application to changing circumstances, and the the constructions of particular groups may or may not be viable for other colleagues (*range*);
- and the development of viable collective systems of construing will depend on people's ability to learn from events and to share their findings (*experience*).

We will be paying attention to processes of validation and invalidation: how are success and failure construed? what measures are being used and why have they been chosen?; what is required, encouraged and approved of, and what is forbidden, discouraged or excluded?; how does a person or team become successful and admired, and how do they become marginalised?

Approaching transitions

Organisations are propelled into change by many forces including shifting markets, global competition, economic fluctuations, demographic changes, social demands, professional developments, technological advances, and national and international policy and legislation. Their own responses are amplified and accelerated by vivid and noisy reactions to many of these events in the wider media and in public discourse. The challenges of change are easily underestimated. It can be a life or death struggle for survival - for the lives and livelihoods of many people, for the legacy of years, decades, sometimes centuries of endeavour, for professional reputations and for personal futures. There is a lot at stake.

Kelly's transitional constructs have potential to normalise responses to change by translating anxiety, threat, hostility and guilt out of discourses of negativity, failure and resistance, locating them in the quotidian as anticipatable features of human systems on the move.

In organisations, we might focus on:

- the difficulties of unfamiliarity (*anxiety*): by encouraging active research of the unknown, making plans of appropriate scale and pace, and locating resources from past experience or from wider networks;

- the risk of significant loss (*threat*): by acknowledging the difficulties people are experiencing (without necessarily needing to resolve them), highlighting areas of stability and continuity, and exploring whether changed circumstances might be re-connected with core values, or how current satisfactions and core meanings might be maintained through other means;

- the tendency to continue with existing scripts rather than cooperate with newly imposed ones (*hostility*): by exploring and appreciating people's concerns in terms of their core meanings and values, promoting timescales that respect human change processes, and considering how people might be facilitated in making shifts without losing face or being seen to fail;

- and the feeling of not recognising ourselves as we react in new situations (*guilt*): by ensuring an infrastructure of support for people as they experiment with changing roles or behaviours, and by anticipating a transitional period during which preemptive judgements are avoided.

PCP's unusual and specific re-definitions of these experiences offer us alternative and highly accessible ways of understanding what people might be going through, why that might be difficult, and how they might keep moving forward.

How to construe the outcomes of our work?

The consultant's anticipations of satisfaction and success are also explored by Kelly in this early chapter. He suggests that our direct reward lies in the development of our skills, and it is this process of continuous learning that attracts and holds many of us in the field. We might also achieve success vicariously through the accomplishments of our clients as we see them exercise their "*initiative, originality and independence*", an outcome derived from locating ourselves in the service of their potential and a commitment to avoiding standardised or ready-made solutions.

He highlights the frustration we may feel when clients opt for solutions which we would not have chosen for them, and in organisations such outcomes can be performed on huge scale. He describes the situation provocatively as having “*staked our personal system against our client’s, and lost*”. The consulting role however consists in a set of subsuming professional constructs with the elasticity to embrace a wide variety of client outcomes, and their achievements are to be construed as validations of our role in their service and not as validations of our own personal construing. Kelly describes this approach as “liberalism without paternalism, not only tolerant of the varying points of view represented in clients, but willing to be devoted to the defence and facilitation of widely differing patterns [of organisation]”.

As a prelude to his exploration of the PCP practitioner’s role, Kelly described “*the basic job*” as “*a task illuminated in terms of our philosophical position, structured in terms of our theory, and pursued along the systematic lines of our diagnostic constructs*”. The meta-structure of PCP itself could be seen as a model for the success criteria required of both of effective consultants and of thriving organisations: a coherent philosophy or world-view; a robust set of fundamental principles to work by; an adequately elaborated and internally coherent theory of process; and an open door to creative practice in line with these components.

Reference

Kelly, G. A., (1955/1991) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, London: Routledge