

CONSULTING COMPETENTLY IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS

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This article presents personalized reactions to the special issue on Culture, Race, and Ethnicity Challenges in Organizational Consulting Psychology. The first part of the article presents the responses of 4 consulting psychologists to 4 questions. The 4 consultants, an African American woman and man and an Anglo American woman and man, were selected based on their experiences in working with consultees and client systems where diversity and multicultural factors mattered. The second part of the article identifies the common themes that emerged from their 4 narratives plus suggestions to assist consultants in better working with consultees and client systems of diverse culture, race, and ethnicity.

Keywords: culture, consultation, multicultural

This article follows a different format than the other contributions to this special issue. Specifically, it combines the narratives of four senior professionals in the field of consulting psychology. Each of these individuals has had substantial but differing experiences in consulting with those of diverse culture, race, and ethnicity. The article includes a thematic analysis of the commonalities of the narratives along with additional suggestions for consultants who wish to develop further cultural competence in their consultation work.

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Part 1 of this article presents the responses of four consulting psychologists to four central questions: (a) In your experience in consulting, what have been the major challenges posed by culture, race and ethnicity?; (b) How have you dealt with these challenges?; (c) Have you developed any conceptual or theoretical models to guide you in this work?; and (d) Given your expertise, what advice and recommendations would you offer to your fellow consultants as they deal with these challenges?

Because this article focuses on individual reactions, the respondents will first be described. The first respondent, Karen Wilson-Starks, is an African American female consultant whose firm specializes in consulting to senior leaders in corporate, military, and faith-based organizations. She is the president and CEO of Transleadership, Inc., a values-based executive leadership development consulting company. She specializes in helping clients to create the conditions to fully utilize the talents and skills of their people by creating cultures that are developmental, inclusive, and transforming. Intervention tools she uses include executive coaching, executive retreats and teambuilding, individual and organizational assessments, and customized executive education.

The second respondent, David B. Peterson, is an Anglo American male consultant who is an expert in executive coaching, but who also possesses substantial generalist organizational consulting experience. He is senior vice president and head of coaching services for Personnel Decisions International, an international consulting firm, and has been a leader in the field of executive coaching for almost 20 years. He is a well-known author whose books include *Leader as Coach* (Peterson & Hicks, 1996) and *Development FIRST* (Peterson & Hicks, 1995). In addition to coaching executives at several major companies, he consults with organizations to help them design, implement, and evaluate their enterprise-wide coaching programs.

The third respondent, Ann M. O'Roark, is a highly experienced Anglo American female consultant in her work in leadership development and international consultation. She is semiretired, focusing on writing and pro bono professional ventures. In her consulting career years, she worked with individuals and organizations interested in management and leadership development, was a lead trainer for the American Management Association's Executive Effectiveness Course, and initial designer-consultant-faculty for the Leadership Development Institute at Eckerd College, an adjunct provider of the Center for Creative Leadership programs. Ann is a leader in several professional organizations and served, and on the editorial review boards of *World Psychology* and the *Journal of Consulting Psychology: Practice and Research*. Her clients ranged from financial institutions, medical centers, state and federal agencies to enterprises and industrial firms.

The fourth respondent, Gregory Pennington, is an African American male consultant who, for over 25 years, has assisted many organizations with issues of diversity plus other general organizational and leadership consultation needs. He is currently Leadership & Talent Practice Leader at the Hay Group and has had previous professional experiences as a senior consultant at RHR International, as an engagement manager at Conner Partners, as a manager of consulting at J. Howard & Associates, and as a senior management development analyst at Southern Company. His client list has included pharmaceuticals, finance and banking, electric utilities, retail, telecommunications, and manufacturing.

A mix of consultant race and gender among these seasoned consultants was intentionally sought because, we argue, the consultant's race and gender likely affect the consultation experience for both consultant and consultee.

Part 1—Participant Responses

In each case that follows, the comments shown were taken directly from the contributor. Some of their formatting may have been altered to achieve uniformity of presentation.

Participant 1—Karen Wilson-Starks

Major Challenges

Stereotypes. People from different cultures, races, and ethnic backgrounds often face stereotypes about those who are from their particular group(s). These stereotypes on the part of those in positions of leadership authority in their organizations are often deeply ingrained and may be unconscious. For example, because an action, such as having an African American man to head the plant in a small southeastern U.S. town, may be novel the company may think it cannot be done or would not be accepted. Such unacknowledged underlying stereotypes, I argue, are often the reason people from different backgrounds are not offered or considered for certain skill and experience building opportunities necessary for career advancement.

Access to key people. The traditional mechanisms for identifying the next level of senior talent often, I contend, miss people from alternative backgrounds. In the past, many mentoring and successor development decisions were conducted informally and leadership was passed from one senior man to his junior male protégé. Despite many changes in this process, there is still a tendency for next generation protégés to reflect the same identity as the previous generation's leaders. This may derive from people generally being more comfortable with those who are like them rather than those who are different. Those who are most different from current leaders tend not to be seen as contenders for senior leadership roles in part because they may not live in the same neighborhoods, belong to the same faith communities, frequent the same social venues, or have the same extracurricular interests. Thus, people who are culturally different may lack the necessary visibility to be considered for mentoring and development. Organizations that are serious about true inclusiveness and utilization of all talent assets have to be very intentional about creating venues for the most different to be seen and appreciated.

Straight feedback. In these times of high litigation and political correctness, some leaders are reluctant to give candid feedback to those who come from different backgrounds. Fearing reprisals from discrimination lawsuits, managers may err on the side of undercommunication and the giving of nonspecific generalized feedback that does not help the person to grow and develop. This lack of candid feedback can result in blind spots that further develop into derailed careers. A potentially up-and-coming nonmajority manager may in such circumstances not have an accurate picture of his or her impact because they are not getting honest feedback on both personal strengths and weaknesses. In a recent coaching session with an African American woman corporate manager, I observed that, to her detriment, she was waiting to receive feedback from her organization. In the meantime, the feedback was not forthcoming and she was floundering in some key areas. Part of our coaching dialogue was about how she could better put the mechanisms in place to ensure ongoing, relevant, and actionable feedback.

Ways I've Dealt With These Challenges

In individual consultations, the more different the clients are from those in their organizations, the more I counsel them to be proactive about their own development. They cannot wait for opportunities to come to them. Instead, I counsel that they have to find out what's available and how to gain access both on the job and in other nonwork related spheres of leadership such as professional or civic organizations. Proactive behavior might include seeking their own ongoing feedback, taking advantage of company mentoring and high potential opportunities, or participation on diversity councils that have access to senior leaders.

When faced with barriers due to stereotypes, I also help clients to think of both internal and external examples that refute the concerns, to address organization fears, and to provide the necessary supports to be successful. A senior military colleague once talked to me about the extra security and other measures that had to be put in place when many years ago, he was made commander of a significant military installation in a small southern town that actively resisted having an African American installation commander. The military also had to take a stand in the community and resist the local pressure.

Advice/Recommendations to Fellow Consultants

1. Recognize that the negative impacts of being culturally different may be very subtle and often invisible to those who are not different. You should not assume that because your organizational client or their top leadership cannot see something or it has never happened to you, the consultant, that such negative behaviors are not happening.
2. Respect your clients and acknowledge the value of both their experiences and their expertise in the realm of living as a different person. Don't pretend to know more about their reality than they do. Clients have frequently told me about their anger and disdain for those who think they know what it's like to be a person of color for example, while at the same time discounting the perceptions of those who are living life as persons of color.
3. Listen, learn, and get educated in this area. In addition to learning from your clients, read relevant books and take continuing education on the subject of cultural diversity. This will help to broaden your own perspective. You will be better able to offer your ideas and insights once you have first established the ability to listen and understand.
4. Recognize that your culturally different clients may require some unique kinds of organizational supports than those who are less different. For example, a strong endorsement by senior management about the new leadership role of a different person may need to be positioned in such a way as to help short-circuit organizational resentments or stereotypes and to acknowledge top level support for the new role.
5. Help your clients explore issues from multiple lenses, to consider alternative explanations for events, and to think of more creative and effective solutions to challenges. If you are also culturally different from your client, then those

differences can be an asset in this process but only if you have first demonstrated respect and understanding.

Resources

There are a number of resources that I have found to be particularly helpful to both organizations and individuals in thinking about cultural diversity issues. These resources are consistent with real-life situations I have repeatedly observed in the work place. They are practical and not just theoretical. In addition, they address real diversity-related challenges such as the narrow band of acceptable behavior, the challenges of increased visibility for different people, the burden of being seen as representing one's entire group, and the reality of different rules and standards for getting ahead. My favorite "short list" of resources includes works by Morrison (1992); Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1994); Thomas and Gabarro (1999); and Griffith (1961).

Participant 2—David Peterson

Challenges in Working With Diverse Audiences in Consulting Psychology

Let me begin by providing some context for my comments here. My undergraduate degree is in linguistics and anthropology, so language and cross-cultural differences are topics in which I have been interested for quite some time. As a consultant, I've delivered coaching, workshops, and presentations in 15 different countries outside North America and provided executive coaching to approximately 40 ex-pats from a dozen countries working in the United States.

Language and Communication

One of the most significant challenges I've encountered in working with people from different backgrounds concerns language. This ranges from the simple situations in which a person's words may have different meanings and connotations or certain terms and colloquialisms may be unfamiliar, to situations where a novel accent requires extra attention and effort, to situations where the person is not even used to discussing the topic at hand in English. The latter happens, for example, in cases in which people use English for business and technical discussions but use the local language for discussing their daily routine, leadership development, human resource issues, and personal goals and values. Coaching such individuals, for example, requires extra time and patience to check on understanding of what are at times relatively complex and subtle issues. In a different context, some of the adaptations I've made when presenting workshops or leading long meetings with audiences who do not speak English fluently include: providing written materials in advance, providing frequent breaks for participants to ask questions and process the information in small groups in their native language, and making sure I am familiar in advance with examples and language that will resonate in their world.

Assumptions and Stereotypes

A second significant challenge regards the assumptions we as consultants make. It is a well-known principle in social psychology that in the absence of individuating information, people tend to draw conclusions about individuals based on stereotypes (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; although even this principle varies somewhat by culture; see Lehman, Chiu,

& Schaller, 2004). To some extent, cultural generalizations are useful preliminary hypotheses to use when working with groups—if that is all the information you have available, it may help you to anticipate how you should approach your initial interactions with them. However, one challenge is to make sure you as a consultant are selecting the right generalization. For example, should I assume my audience will be talkative and outgoing because they are Italian or should I assume they will be reticent and reserved because they are engineers? For another group, do I base my assumptions on the fact that they are all executives or that they are from India?

Although generalizations, stereotypes, and assumptions may be of some benefit at the early stages of dealing with groups, I find they almost always get in the way of my dealings with an individual (Peterson, 2007). So I try to remind myself to approach each new person with openness and curiosity, and be as vigilant as possible in monitoring my own reactions. I also need to be aware that people will make assumptions based on who I am—some of the people I work with have been surprised when I do not fit their stereotype of an American, a White male, an executive coach, a consultant, or a psychologist. So I have had to learn to be prepared for addressing assumptions others may make about me as well as in keeping my own biases and assumptions in check, constantly testing to see what conclusions I've drawn and whether or not they are valid for this individual or for this group.

Authenticity and Adaptation

In my early days as a consultant, I used to try very hard to behave in the ways that I thought I was expected to behave, to adapt as much as possible to the local culture or norms. As a result, I often felt nongenuine, and worried obsessively about the mistakes I inevitably made. Over time, I have learned that working across cultures is a matter of bringing out the authentic sides of my personality and background, discovering the authentic aspects of my audience, and finding a respectful way for both of us to bring as much of our true selves to the interaction as possible. I used to try too hard to be respectful of the other, at the cost of being respectful to myself. Now I aim for, though I do not always achieve, a way of being equally respectful to all parties who engage, including myself.

Using feedback as an example (because that is a topic that is sensitive to individuals in general and manifests itself quite differently in various cultures, e.g., Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; Hoppe, 1998, 2000), I used to try extremely hard to be politically correct and find exactly the right approach and the right words. Now, I try to turn such discussions into more of a conversation, engaging the other person or group in a discussion on how we proceed and how we handle the conversation. I offer my interpretation in my words—still chosen carefully and respectfully—and engage them in finding the words that have meaning for them, to make sure that the feedback comes across in a way that is as useful and meaningful to them as possible.

Advice for Fellow Consultants

1. Get to know people and treat them as individuals. Avoid drawing simplistic conclusions based on the superficial (e.g., visual) characteristics and demographics of a person and approach them with an open mind. Look for what variables define them as an individual and hold any conclusions lightly. This is hard work and requires discipline to be routinely mindful of how we view others.
2. Learn about individual differences. The more you know about how people differ—whether personality, culture, life experiences, roles and relationships, or

values—the more quickly you can recognize and respond to the unique aspects of each person you encounter.

3. Seek diverse experiences and approach them with curiosity. When I travel, for example, I try to eat local foods and visit local shops, including grocery stores, which provide a rich expression of commerce and culture. When I read or watch movies I make sure I occasionally sample something far outside my normal routine or interests, and ponder who would this appeal to and why, and I ask myself, what can I learn from this?
4. Bring your authentic self to your work with diverse populations. Or at least do this: Consider when you've done your best work; identify what aspects of your true personality contributed the most to that work and look for ways to bring those qualities more quickly to your future work.

Participant 3—Ann O’Roark

What Have Been the Major Challenges Posed by Culture, Race, and Ethnicity?

Whether working with a new company, a new industry, a new agency, a new association, or a new international situation the most important and first challenge for me as a consultant is being sure that I understand what’s important, here and now, with these particular people (O’Roark, 2003c). Seeing what is important begins with discovering the values, assumptions, goals, norms, and information framing the current conditions in a way that demonstrates respect for others as well as for my own culture, race, and ethnicity (O’Roark, 1995b, pp. 134–135). Establishing a baseline of mutual trust is, I believe, the first prerequisite for meeting challenges posed by culture, race, and ethnicity in ways that result in outcomes that are both meaningful and productive. My early civil rights work in the United States ended abruptly when we were told in no uncertain terms by the leader of the sanitation workers strike in Florida that no matter that my partner had marched with King in Selma or that Malcolm X held a meeting in my home: “Whitie, get out and don’t come back if you value your lives. We will do it ourselves.”

A similar message is, I believe, coming louder and stronger across national borders to those of us who have been engaged in leadership and assessment consulting. At the International Union of Psychological Science congress in Beijing in 2006, for example, Chinese psychologists in the organizational field made it quite clear to long-timer U.S., British, and Indian presenters that the Chinese had their own models, theories, and assessment tools, and they no longer needed or wanted to work from our hand-me-downs. A Scandinavian widely respected for his contributions to management and organizational literature, who was serving as the expert discussant for the session, intervened to reduce mounting tensions and assured that the Indian psychologist was permitted to complete his comments. This exchange was the closest to overt hostility that I experienced in that conference and ancient city of Peking, whose skyline was already dominated by hundreds of construction cranes and new buildings setting the stage for the 2008 Beijing Olympic competitions and the symbolic “five friendlies.”

First Impressions: Strangers in a Strange Land

An example of how easy it is to get off on the wrong foot in distant lands comes from a recent experience on the Island of Kos in Greece, where Hippocrates taught under a very

large, still standing tree. An Italian psychologist-colleague asked me to intervene in resolution of misunderstandings between her and the staff of the local arrangers of a professional conference she was orchestrating. English was the second language for both the association president, a faculty member at the University of Padua in Italy, and the onsite representatives of the Athenian meeting management firm. Because English is the established language for the conferences, I was able to listen to each party describing in English how they perceived the impasse. Two primary problems were at issue: onsite decisions about placement of limited computer equipment in the several meeting rooms, and the amount of the final invoice from the Athenian firm to the professional association. It turns out that the onsite staff could not understand the English of the president and was going to another conference attendee for guidance. That individual was a male member of the board, and the woman president of the association was not feeling her authority and leadership role was being respected.

Once the staff realized that only the president was to be the decision maker, and I would be at hand to translate English-into-English, all moved along smoothly—that is, until the presentation of the firm's invoice. When this far exceeded initial contract estimates, it was necessary to arrange a meeting with the head of the firm and the two association presidents who signed the agreements. Once again, I provided English-to-English translation and served as a negotiation consultant. The firm dropped their "hidden" charges that arose from assumptions the firm in Greece made about inquiries sent from the association leaders during early phases of planning and determined by the board to be unnecessary expenses. Respect and assumptions related to language barriers turned out to be what was important in understanding this international conflict.

Gender sensitivities as well as cross-cultural misunderstandings impacted both examples described here. Women leaders from national cultures with historically strong male dominance patterns are recently stepping forward to assert themselves; they are freshly and especially sensitive to respect issues, no longer willing to walk three steps behind their male counterparts. In this instance, the confluence of emerging gender dynamics and lack of information about national variations in names, titles, and visible status recognitions, set the stage for personally experienced offenses rooted in international cultural variations that emerge from both historical and contemporary group dynamics. To further complicate consulting interventions, international understandings and misunderstandings are often imbedded within emotional states of stress and excitement experienced by jetlagged travelers, which are quite different for older and younger generations, and associated with traveling to a society or community hostile to or supportive of one's own social culture (Dana, 1997, 2000).

Getting Down to Business: Doing the Right Thing, the Right Way, and at the Right Time

A third example of a major challenge I have encountered related to culture, race, and ethnicity is related to theoretical content and psychological interventions that are recognized and widely used when consulting in the United States. After presenting a workshop in Taipei, Taiwan (O'Roark, 1995a), on administering, scoring, and interpreting a 360-degree assessment instrument used in management and leadership development, I made a special effort to speak with the Chinese psychologists participating in the session. They were highly complimentary of my presentation skills, of my knowledge, and of the interesting concepts in U.S. leadership theory. I pressed to hear how they thought this type

of intervention might be used in their work in China. They bowed deeply, shaking their heads. “We could never use this in our leadership work. We do not give feedback to our superiors.” Diversity in management and leadership customs, theories, and assumptions mean that although personality measures can often be translated, back-translated, and adapted to another culture, the interventions are not so simply adjusted for application or usefulness in another society. For this reason, I undertook the challenge of envisioning a model for an international organizational consulting process (IOCP; O’Roark, 2002, p. 530). This overview of an internationally respectful double check on consultant assumptions about the client’s culture is an extension and adaptation of earlier models that I developed to map my consulting activities and my efforts to be proactively responsible for evaluations of results and outcomes: Calibration Consultation (O’Roark, 1995b, 2003a, 2005) and Invitational Leadership Approach (O’Roark, 2000, 2002, 2003b, 2005).

Have You Developed Any Conceptual or Theoretical Models to Guide You in This Work?

The three models named above are grounded in psychological theory, the school of perceptual psychology, sometimes referred to as phenomenology, or humanistic, or third force psychology (as opposed to psychoanalytic or behavioral–cognitive) psychology. Although valuing the knowledge generated through all three streams of research and evidence, my training in perceptual psychology has proven the most insightful and useful in addressing the challenges posed by culture, race, and ethnicity in international settings as well as when working with companies in different industries incorporated in the United States. I begin with a fundamental perceptual principle and assumption that all behavior, from the perspective of the behaving person, is rational, logical, and the least threatening behavior possible at that point in time. Moreover, that person’s underlying intent is one shared with other humans: to “order, organize, and integrate our activities for survival, adequacy, growth and meaningfulness” (Gordon, 1969; O’Roark, 2000, p. 79).

All of my models of consultation are syntheses of learning from predecessors in the discipline. For these models, I am most indebted to leadership theory researchers and my mentors—Bernard M. Bass’s transformational leadership models (Bass, 1985, 1990, 1991); Robert House’s global leadership database (House, 1999); the organizational renewal concepts of Gordon Lippitt (1969) and Gordon and Ronald Lippitt (1978); Ed Schein’s (1985) corporate culture-models; assessment theory researchers and mentors, research on basic emotions and test adaptation by Charles Spielberger (Spielberger, Moscoso, & Brunner, 2002); constructive use of differences in models by Isabel Myers and Mary McCaulley (1989); and the work on trust building and competing values by early human relations theorists Jack Gibb (1978) and Robert Quinn (1992).

Many others contributed to my understanding of what is important when consulting across boundaries. Arthur Combs (Combs, Avila, & Purkey, 1971; Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999; Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976; Combs & Snygg, 1959) gave me my roots in perceptual, humanistic fundamentals, which emphasized the influence of the self on any intervention. The self-as-instrument concept was adapted and extended by Richard Dana (1997, 2000) to show the critical salience of the values, beliefs, and knowledge of the consulting psychologist or clinician on effectiveness and outcomes when working as applied psychologists in any culture, group, or environment other than our own birth. Alderfer (1972) gave us the essentials of group identity within group dynamics. I was helped by his succinct summary of basic human concerns, security, relatedness, and growth, that crossed boundaries separating individuals in a group, even heritage, though

each group member brings a number of identities into their shared work situation (gender, nationality, age group, ancestors, faith or belief system, career history, educational history, and many, many more identities such as parent, child, and sibling).

Rosabeth Moss Kantor (1977) was the one whose research demonstrated how it takes more than three from any one identity group in a group to dispel that groups' tendency to assign the underrepresented identities full responsibility for being a stereotype of that identity. For example, supposedly, if I am in a group with only one or two Native Americans and these individuals are Navajos, I might find it hard to develop trust without even consciously remembering that I grew up with horror tales of how the Shawnee Indians in western Virginia, eastern Kentucky scalped my Irish American forefathers in the early 1700s. However, if there are three or more Native American Indians, with several heritages represented, I might be able to avoid unconscious stereotyping and form trusting collaborative working relationships quicker.

Guanxi is a model for establishing and using relationships that I first heard about from a Consulting Psychology Division colleague, Mike Atella, during a joint symposium presentation when he described his assignment in China and how long it took his Chinese hosts talking to him at his hotel before they were ready to invite him to come into their laboratories and offer the management consultation they had requested. The resolution of the second example described above was brought about more quickly and effectively because the Greek host group representative and I had established a collaborative relationship in the process of resolving misunderstandings that arose in the previous and similar interpersonal conflict, the first example.

The importance of building trust and establishing working relations with international work is of such importance that *guanxi* was chosen to be the title for the second step in the international organizational consulting process (O'Roark, 2000, pp. 530–531). Short for the Chinese word, *guanxixue*, the concept is about getting to know and understand clients before trying to do business or make changes in their behaviors, organizations, or value systems.

Respondent 4—Gregory Pennington¹

“The prospective client turned to me and asked, “So . . . what is it like being Black and consulting with executives?” My first reaction was a recognition that my White colleagues attending the lunch meeting were suddenly on edge as much as I was. I also remembered thinking and feeling that there were several possible answers I could offer, none of which would be spontaneous, all of which needed to be genuine, and most of which would not be taken at face value any way. Being reasonably well-trained as a psychologist and having some gifts of active listening, I responded by saying, “What do you mean?”

This was a test or a game. For the next 60 s my new colleagues would be gauging whether I was really part of the team even though they probably did not have a valid scoring key for my response. The prospective client was taking advantage of this opportunity to make a point and probably had in his mind what the “right answer” should be. Being the “only one” or “one of few” in an organization was not new to me, so the test seemed familiar and tiresome that it was still being administered. In some ways, it was a welcome one because being Black was and is an important element of my self-identity. Nevertheless, it was

¹ Most of the material from Dr. Pennington was drawn from *The Consulting Psychologist*, the e-newsletter for the Society of Consulting Psychology, in a Spotlight on Consulting piece entitled, “So What’s It Like Being Black: Reflections on Coaching and Consulting African-Americans.”

one of those moments when I had to process in a matter of seconds, emotionally and intellectually, whether I wanted to play the game and how I wanted to play it.

My delay tactic of asking “what do you mean?” worked. The prospective client rephrased the question and asked “I mean is it uncomfortable?” I saw an opening and took it thinking that if he was looking for a way to back off on whatever he was going after a dash of humor might be welcomed by all of us. I jumped in before he could complete his thought and asked, “Do you mean uncomfortable for me or uncomfortable for them?” This was followed by nervous laughter from my colleagues that I interpreted as being patronizing laughter from the prospective client as he and I looked at each other with superficial smiles. However, I recognized that he was not planning to back off and waited for his next attack.

The prospective client continued by saying, “Seriously, since most consultants who do this are not Black, how do you find executives react to you when they realize you are Black?” On one hand this seemed to be a reasonable question. From another perspective, his timing was suspect regarding when the question was being asked and in what social context it was being asked. I remember dispensing with trying to read and manage the reactions of my colleagues and I remember severely reducing any concerns I had about carefully framing my responses for us to get the business. I settled for the following response: “I recognize that many people do not consciously think of race which often means they assume people are White. When I appear, I assume they recognize like you did that I am Black and in a blink of the eye, some say to themselves ‘I didn’t realize’ or ‘interesting.’ As in most first encounters, we usually both try to determine what we have in common. Talking about the Andrew Wyeth painting on the wall might help. My Harvard degree might help. In some cases being Black might help. My actual ability to be a resource to you might help. I find that the most successful executives figure out how to utilize all the resources available to them. Other executives get distracted by unnecessary things.”

I took a sip of water, listened to the held breaths slowly being released around the table, worried a nanosecond about what my colleagues thought and what this prospective client thought, and began to think about where else I might want to work.

The prospective client said “good answer.” Later on, my colleagues said that I had handled the situation well. I wondered if I had been too concerned with everyone else’s feelings and ended up “sucking up.” The prospective client decided to hire us; however I was not on the team that worked with the client.

Does Race Really Matter?

The *New England Journal of Medicine* (Cooper, Kaufman, & Ward, 2003) concluded several years ago that race is a biologically meaningless construct. Apparently of the 30,000 to 40,000 genes that make us human, only about 6 determine skin color. Although understandably, one can argue that this lends credence to the belief that we are all just human, few social scientists will deny that race does exist. Malcolm Gladwell’s, 2005 book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* provided an interesting perspective on how “thin-slicing” and our adaptive unconscious lead us to make rapid decisions based on few pieces of data supported by our experiences. The test at lunch was not a surprise to me. I do believe that we all process a significant amount of information in a relatively short amount of time. It would make sense that the most obviously noticeable data would be processed consciously or unconsciously. Though we cannot see the six genes that determine race, we can notice differences in skin color. Though our direct experiences with people of different colors than ourselves may be limited, it is not likely that someone in America has not at least heard of an

incident in which a person's behavior was attributed to race. In two seconds, in a "blink," we connect new data to old experiences and perceptions. The prospective client at lunch was at least direct about what was going through his head.

Nevertheless, are we, particularly in America, and are we, particularly African Americans, overly concerned with race? There is evidence to support this notion. An article in a major business magazine noted: "According to the Joint Center for Politics and Economics, 81% of Black professionals think workplace discrimination is still common. This is not merely the belief that job discrimination exists, but that it is common" ("What African Americans Think of Corporate America," 1998).

Is this belief of job discrimination merely a perception? Does it actually impact performance? There is some experimental research that supports the anecdotal experience of many Black executives who believe that their performance is viewed differently than their White colleagues. In Thomas and Gabarro's (1999) book, *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate*, distinctly different paths for development of minority executives and their White counterparts are identified. In an effort to explain some influences on those differences Thomas and Gabarro cited the research of Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1993).

Experimental research has shown that people are more likely to attribute excellent performance by a majority group member to the majority person's own efforts and abilities. In contrast, the same level of performance by a minority is more likely to be attributed to the situation or the effort of others. (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999, p. 118)

Even if some degree of discrimination exists or at least some elevated level of consciousness exists for some of us regarding race, does it interfere with people being successful in the business world? Slay (2003, p. 56) asked this question in an interesting way by posing the following questions: "Do the social identities of African American business leaders differ from African Americans that are not in leadership positions? Do the social identities of African American business leaders influence perceptions of their leadership ability by other individuals—subordinates, peers, and superiors?" Slay raised a series of propositions that warrant further research by scholars and practitioners. She referred to CEOs Kenneth Chennault (American Express), Richard Parsons (AOL Time Warner), and Stanley O'Neal (Merrill Lynch) as examples of successful African American business leaders who express "discomfort when race is invoked in reflections on their success" (p. 56).

In contrast to O'Neal, Daniels (2004) offered the following reflections from her interviews with Kenneth Chennault and Richard Parsons. She wrote in regards to her interview with Chennault that "he was talking about the importance of race, obligations to the race, and about Blacks succeeding without compromising their Blackness" (p. 126). Daniels went on to quote Richard Parsons as saying,

many people have written in the abstract that race is the quintessential question in America. I used to reject it out of hand because I thought it was silly. But I'm beginning to think that they are right . . . we just can't seem to get past it. (p. 128)

At my lunch meeting my social identity was both as an African American and as a capable consultant. Even if I had reconciled in my mind that both of those identities could peacefully and productively coexist, I was sensitive to what I perceived was the prospective client's concern as to how they might conflict with one another and affect my impact as a consultant. It is tempting to propose that the reconciliation of those differences evolves over time. This might explain how Chennault and Parsons seem to have come to

stages in their careers when they are more comfortable and direct in talking about race and its impact on their effectiveness as leaders. I suspect that the balancing of these identities is a more constant effort of reconciling and integrating even though it may not be shared out loud with others. I remember a senior executive African American woman lamenting that “By many standards I have reached a significant level of accomplishment despite being Black and female. I wonder how much further I might have gone, and how faster I might have gotten here, if I had not felt I needed to spend so much energy proving that a Black and a woman could do this.”

What can we do as consultants or coaches in working with African American executives? Cobbs and Turnock (2003) identified the following common threads in the stories told by this sample of men and women who excelled in organizations like PepsiCo, GE, Merrill Lynch, Kraft, Prudential, Chrysler, and others: reconciling the ambiguities inherent for Black professionals in corporate culture; trusting your own abilities and potential while managing the ever-present issue of race; overcoming isolation to establish not only your place in the organization but also a voice that will be heard and respected; reading the unwritten rules and developing the “sixth sense” necessary to play the game; cultivating and managing the relationships that will be crucial to securing more meaningful and influential positions; understanding what true power is, how to compete for and acquire it, and how to translate it into substantial leaders.

I conducted a small survey of African American executives a few years ago to gain their perspective on what issues were important to address when coaching them. Their comments were similar to the themes identified by Cobbs and Turnock (2003). I have summarized their comments below with some suggestions about how they might be addressed by an executive coach.

Race Matters

The race card is present even if face down. You are more likely to understand its impact, if you find ways to raise it as the coach. It is too costly for the executive to play it. Find a way to open this discussion. Most executives will not volunteer it to you. Understand what behaviors are interpreted differently when demonstrated by Blacks compared to non-Blacks.

Rumors of intellectual inferiority flourish. “Innate intellectual ability is still the predominant belief in companies and in people: Some folks are born smart and some folks are not. The focus has moved from questions about “IQ” to questions about “strategic thinking.” Insist on defining behavioral characteristics and performance versus indicators, (e.g., “able to synthesize a wide range of information and identify overall themes” vs., “being a Harvard graduate”). Force others to define “strategic thinking.” It is used as a substitute for questioning innate intellectual ability.

Warring souls at peace. Though one’s title and socioeconomic status provides more options, it does not change one’s core identity. You cannot look at a Black person and *not* see the color of their skin. They cannot deny their color and their self-identity will always include race. Explore the person’s outside of work activities. Compare, contrast, and leverage those skills and interests. Accept the person’s perception of having “to do more” because of a “Black tax.” Focus more on how they cope with this perception/reality.

More “how to” than “hugs”. Given an overall goal of increasing one’s impact on the organization, there is more value in a coach providing directions to navigate the environment than there is in a coach who is exploring for insight. Navigation includes mapping the environment, charting the paths of least resistance and most impact, and

running interference to minimize obstacles. Identify the written and unwritten rules of success in the organization. Ask and answer: where and how will race be perceived as an obstacle?

Race Does Not Matter

Ultimately all executives understand that they must contribute to the bottom line. Ultimately and ideally, the evidence of their contribution and success will be measurable and objective. Nevertheless, you must accept the paradox that it is critical to consider race to get to the point where race does not matter. Actively listen to the person's perspective about race. Distinguish between those areas where race matters and where it does not. For example, what would you have advised me to do at the lunch meeting? Would you have given me a different script? If you were one of my White colleagues there, what would you have done? How would you have counseled me afterward?

When diversity is raised in the context of developing leaders or consulting with executives, someone inevitable suggests that "fundamentally, excellent consulting and coaching is all the same regardless of the person's race or gender." This is true. To be effective as a consultant or a coach, we must be able to understand our client in his or her context. This includes their social and organizational context as well as their self-identity and how it impacts their behavior and the perceptions of others around them. The skills we have to probe and explore, to discern themes and connections, to listen to and challenge, and to help our clients accurately map their environments should not be abandoned when the client raises a question about the relevance of race. A tragic and arguably ethical mistake we make too often is to dismiss or ignore the question from a client or from ourselves: "So . . . what is it like being black . . . ?"

Part 2—Common Themes and Suggestions for Developing Competence in Consulting with Consultees and Client Systems of Diverse Culture, race, and Ethnicity

The above four narratives convey powerful stories and images about the importance of attending to issues of culture, race, and ethnicity in consulting. Seven common themes emerge from their varied narratives.

- Theme 1. Culture, race, and ethnicity matters.
- Theme 2. Networking and mentoring are more challenging for nonmajority managers and leaders to obtain.
- Theme 3. Use of language between the consultant and consultee may be a challenge or an issue when diversity is greater.
- Theme 4. Combining an emic (universal), etic (group), and unique (person) approach to organizational consulting with consultees is recommended.
- Theme 5. It is best to bring up differences of culture, race, and ethnicity directly and into the open.
- Theme 6. It takes concentrated effort to avoid cultural myopia and colonialism.

Theme 7. When the consultant and the consultee are of differing culture, race, or ethnicity, more time is likely to be needed to build trust and to develop the consulting relationship.

More than a decade ago, Steward (1996) called for consultants to attend to workplace diversity issues. He stated then and it would remain true now that important progress can be accomplished by focusing on organizational infrastructure, job satisfaction, relationships among staff, and work productivity. Similarly, a decade ago Plummer (1998) argued that attending to diversity consultation is a must given the increasing diversity in the workplace. Then and now, dealing with issues of awareness, sociopolitical implications, open dialogue, cultural competence, and cultural norms are the main means for organizations to accomplish enhanced diversity functioning. Relatively little empirical work has been conducted in this area to date. Yet, the presses of internationalization and diversity within and external to organizations will continue to push for consultants to incorporate a multicultural and racially sensitive consultation approach (Dougherty, 2006).

With effort, study, practice, and mentoring, organizational consultants can gain knowledge, attitude, and behavioral skills (see Ramirez, 1998; Sue, 2003, 2007) needed to have reasonable and effective cultural competence when consulting with consultees and client systems that differ culturally, racially, or ethnically from the consultant. With further scientific study, we can deepen our understanding of consulting effectively in this increasingly multicultural world. The need for enhancement of both practice and science on this topic is great.

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