



# The Consultancy: Peer-to-Peer Problem-Solving in Fifteen Minutes or Less

“Consultancies” are small group, problem-solving exercises that are used to generate specific feedback for individuals in a short, intense format. Consultancies can be used in a variety of settings for lots of different issues. For example, a researcher who has developed a new model of health care delivery might use a consultancy with a group of peers to help brainstorm effective ways of disseminating the model. Consultancies can also be used in staff meetings to help one member of a team address a particularly challenging piece of work.

In a consultancy each participant gets focused attention on her/his issue and quality feedback from peers and an expert in the field. Below is the format that SCP has found to be especially useful for running a consultancy.

## CONSULTANCY 101

There is one facilitator and one time keeper per group. The facilitator should have some expertise in the issue area being discussed. There are no more than 10 participants in each group. Each participant gets:

- 3-4 minutes to describe their challenge
- 1-2 minutes to answer clarifying questions from the group
- 5-7 minutes to listen to the group brainstorm ideas
- 1 minute to summarize the ideas heard

In sum, each participant has approximately 12 minutes. If there are nine or ten participants in each group and the facilitator moves things along, you should get through all of them comfortably in 3 hours, even with a 10-minute break at half-time (after participant #4 or #5) and a minute or two of paper rustling in between each participant. Here's how it works:



1. A few weeks PRIOR to the consultancy session the organizer should have participants submit their challenges for review. It is essential that the organizer(s) review the challenges in advance of the session to ensure that they are appropriate to the topic and that they are specific enough to generate meaningful suggestions. This step is critical to the success of the exercise!
2. In the consultancy, the participant describes his or her main challenge. He or she should provide enough background information about the challenge so that everyone in the room understands the context. The participant has 3-4 minutes to do this.
3. The group then asks the participant clarifying questions about the challenge or the background to ensure they understand the situation fully. This should take 1-2 minutes, depending on how clear the initial presentation is.
4. The group then brainstorms for 5-7 minutes, providing constructive feedback to the participant, particularly ideas about how he or she can approach the challenge in question. During this time, it is preferable if the participant does not speak, but rather listens to the conversation. If there are additional clarifying questions or inaccurate statements made about the project or situation, the participant should respond, but we should try to avoid a dynamic where the participant raises objections to ideas as they arise or where the conversation starts to ping-pong back and forth between the participant and individuals in the audience.
5. When the time is up or the conversation lags, the participant will then have 1 minute to respond to comments made, ask for more clarification or depth on a particular point, and describe what he or she learned.



## The Consultancy: Peer-to-Peer Problem-Solving in Fifteen Minutes or Less

The consultancy is meant to be a group problem-solving process, where each participant has a chance both to get feedback on a challenge he or she is facing and provide feedback to others. The facilitator's role is to provide "expert" advice to supplement and enrich the conversation. The facilitator also needs to stop the participant from responding to ideas or issues during the feedback and advice section. It can't become a discussion.

There is also a timekeeper assigned to each group. This does a few important things. One, it ensures that everyone gets their fair share of the time allotted. Two, it ensures that folks don't take too long setting up their problem, so there is not enough time for good feedback. Three, it adds a sense of urgency to the proceedings, which creates energy and momentum for the work at hand. The key to the exercise is for the facilitators to be ruthless in limiting the conversation to the allotted time, or even cutting it short if the discussion falters. A general rule of thumb is that if the group has run out of comments, then it's also run out of steam.

### **SOME THOUGHTS ON DYNAMICS**

These consultancies should be constructive and fun. While each group will differ, our experience with this process is that it is quite energizing for participants. Everybody gets a chance to speak and to listen, and it reinforces that very often when we face a problem together, "the answer is already in the room."

Peer-to-peer consultancies are also meant to be as helpful as possible, so facilitators may tweak the format if they think it can enrich the discussion. The consultant/experts are brought in to lend their expertise to the participants. However, they need be mindful of others in the group to ensure that one or two people do not dominate the discussion.