

*JMC* JOURNAL OF  
MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

The Forum For Management Consultants Worldwide

*Harvey Blustain*

Consultants  
as Shamans

*Reprinted from Volume 7, No. 1 – Spring 1992*

© Copyright by Journal of Management Consulting, Inc.

# Consultants as Shamans

Harvey Blustain CMC

**T**wenty years ago, I began my professional life as a social anthropologist working with shamans in Nepal. After several career twists and turns, I am now a management consultant and convinced that my career has come full circle. As I hone my consulting skills, I find that Himalayan ritual healers were among my best mentors. Shamans have much to teach consultants about effective problem-solving, client relations, and process control.

---

## *A Primer on Shamans*

---

Shamans exist in societies throughout the world. Although their underlying belief systems and practices vary extensively (the term *shaman* comes to us from the Tungus, a group of Siberian herders), they collectively constitute a category of religious specialists who cure illness and solve problems through their supernatural powers. They believe illness is caused by personal and interpersonal, not just mechanistic, forces. In Nepal, even apparent accidents are due to the intervention of spirits, often sent by ill-wishing neighbors and kinsmen. So cures must operate at the spiritual level, too. As an intermediary between the moral and spirit worlds, a shaman's power derives from both his esoteric knowledge and his ability to enter trance through possession by his spirit familiars.<sup>1</sup>

Shamans diagnose and solve an array of problems: illness, personal calamity, social strife, even the finding of lost objects. The process through

*Drawing on his experience as a cultural anthropologist in Nepal, and now a management consultant, the author finds shamans and consultants have much in common. Both recruit clients, engage them in interactive processes, and help solve problems. Read on; see how consultants can learn from shamans to their great benefit.*

which they work is similar to that of consultants. Although the examples here are drawn from my own work in Nepal, the overall process is universal.

First, shamans must be trained. Some reported in vivid detail the first time they were possessed by the spirit that was to become their familiar and guide. "Natural" shamans, their skill was imparted in an epiphanic flash. Other shamans detailed their arduous training as young men from patient mentors. The height of shamanistic education, however, reportedly came from the *bun jhankri* ("forest shaman"), a semi-wild creature whose students reportedly had to endure years of deprivation deep in a Himalayan cave before going on to great wealth and fame.

My inability to find any student of the *bun jhankri* may be explained by his rigorous selection criteria — or by

the fact that few of them survive their training. The *bun jhankri* reputedly has a wife who, if she catches any of her husband's students, eats them.

Shamans must recruit clients. In a village, people will know all the shamans, their specialties and their capabilities. But, like consultants, shamans still need to convince potential clients that they have something to offer. Through networking, reminders of past successes, and other influence techniques, shamans must inform the public that "I can help you." One shaman I knew was regularly possessed at weddings and festivals by an array of spirits, all of whom (literally) sang his praises by recounting his difficult cases.

*Shamans must find ways to make their powers visible and obvious.*

Since shamanistic power is derived from unseen forces, people need to see a demonstration of the shaman's prowess. Akin to the consultant's quest for "boardroom presence," shamans must

---

*Harvey Blustain CMC is senior consultant at Schoonover Associates, a management consulting firm located in Newton Centre, Mass. He has engaged in various types of consulting, including technical assistance for international development agencies, market research in fiber optics and telecommunications, management training and development, strategic human resource development, and change management. A graduate of New York University, he holds an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in social anthropology from Yale University.*

find ways to make their powers visible and obvious. To focus the awe of their audience, they begin a treatment with ritualistic—and often dramatic—displays, often involving possession by gods or spirits. One shaman began his sessions possessed by the tiger god, resulting in a fearsome pawing and roaring. His long-suffering wife could be found most mornings patiently stringing together the beads he had scattered the night before in a feline frenzy.

A prerequisite for healing is fact-finding and information-gathering. Cures begin when the shaman, possessed by his spirit familiar, interrogates the patient after causing him to be possessed by the offending spirit. A discussion then follows between the two spirits: The possessed “shaman” asks the possessed “patient” what kind of spirit it is and why it has caused the illness. The illness-causing spirit often refuses to disclose its identity, so a shaman’s skill depends largely on his ability to ask questions and establish facts. Several points may possess a shaman during an evening, each pressing the offending spirit to confess and each taking a different line of questioning. By having the interrogation take place between spirits, individuals in a small community are personally absolved from discussing embarrassing situations.

People will often have a good idea what causes an illness: A woman’s inability to lactate, for example, was easily linked by everyone to her bad relationship with her mother-in-law, a local witch. Despite some surprises, the shaman is usually careful to ensure that the diagnosis makes sense to the client. To a great extent, the interrogation removes doubts about the identity of the offending spirit. Because the patient and kinsmen are

responsible participants in the cure, it’s critical that everyone concerned “buy in” to the diagnosis.

In contrast to our own military metaphor of medicine—“attacking” viruses, “invasive” procedures and “magic bullets”—Nepalis hold to a more culinary example. Illness happens when spirits “eat” away at the body; cures involve providing the spirit with an alternative food, usually a chicken. The shaman may also prescribe a range of other activities, some individual, some communal, some ritualistic, some herbal, and some (from our point of view) medically sound.

At a superficial level, therefore, shamans behave like consultants: They receive training, recruit clients, engage their clients in an interactive process, and solve problems. They help others understand and resolve dysfunctional situations.

---

### *Shamanistic Competencies*

---

But the parallels between the professions are more exact. In examining the competencies of superior shamans, we can learn much about what it takes to be a successful consultant.

#### *Shamans Know That Their Effectiveness Depends on the Faith of Their Clients*

Shamanism may seem superstitious to our western minds, but it’s an extremely effective form of intervention.<sup>2</sup> A shaman’s success comes from factors such as motivation, trust, and faith that must operate in *any* healing relationship. He is effective not because he marshals scientific truth, but because people *believe* he’ll be effective. By believing, they establish the essential precondition for success.

Like the ritual actions of shamans, there is nothing intrinsically scientific or inevitably correct about the recommendations of consultants. What we prescribe is based on our experience, judgment, and predispositions. Scientific management, managing by objectives, “managing up,” participative management, empowerment, diversity, quality: All of our concepts and “truths” are in fact belief systems. Like shamans, we’re most effective when we gain and leverage the faith and trust of our clients—when we get them to adopt our view of how the world works and how it could be improved.

*Most of our success stems from our command of process, relationships, influence, and other “soft” skills.*

Thus, most of our success stems from our command of process, relationships, influence, and other “soft” skills. Unless clients have faith in our efficacy, and we have established the conditions for their faith, no solution will be effective. Many consultants fail because they don’t take the effort required to build personal relations with key influencers, frame outcomes to fit their clients’ interests, and generate confidence in what they propose.

#### *Excellent Shamans are Careful to Gain Stakeholder Buy-In*

People see illness as arising from the social nexus, so Nepalese shamans carefully involve whole families, even communities, in the healing. There are no private examination rooms. Diagnosis and treatment occur in densely packed, smoky rooms, with kinsmen and neighbors voicing their opinions.

Anyone can question the offending spirit. Between trance episodes, everyone will discuss the evidence and suggest questions. When the diagnosis has been made everybody eats the ritual chicken offering. Shamans well know that failure to satisfy the primary stakeholders means continuing problems and further treatment—possibly by a rival shaman.

Consultants, too, work hard to ensure smooth acceptance of their recommendations. Much of that effort is motivated by a sincere desire to learn people's concerns and to incorporate them into our analyses. But pilot workshops, draft reports, informal briefings, and "off-line" conversations serve another purpose, too. Like the serving of shamanic chicken, they're a way to co-opt our audience. By ingesting our ideas, stakeholders make them their own.

#### ***Good Shamans Know that Most Problems Are Systemic and Social, Not Technical***

Underlying the cosmology of Nepalese shamanism is a belief that illnesses—and cures—are embedded in a network of social relationships. Although Hinduism recognizes the existence of thousands of deities, Nepalese villagers acknowledge 108 gods, 108 goddesses, and 108 evil spirits. Theoretically, any of these can cause illness. Yet only four are regularly identified by shamans as causes. These four all are (or were) living beings with roots in the community: *bai* (dead relatives for whom no proper funerary rites were performed), *pichash* (people whose corpses were touched by an animal), *boksi* (living witches, usually old widows), and *dankini* (the spirit of a dead *boksi*). Relationships are at the root of social and personal ills, so shamans know their work en-

tails realigning the spiritual and social order. For that reason, shamans rarely operate outside of a limited geographic area. A woman shaman whose fame drew patients from all over the district maintained an elaborate network of informants. They spent their days at teashops listening to the comments and complaints of waiting supplicants.

#### ***The most effective shamans I observed were those who controlled the tempo and tone of the proceedings through careful choreography and manipulation.***

A consultant's work, too, should be primarily systemic and holistic. Quality, technology transfer, change management, systems integration—all of the "technical" projects we work on succeed only when the social matrix is addressed and managed. Like shamans, we are most effective when we're aware of past conflicts and alliances, hidden agendas, motivations, and expectations of the principal actors. As David F. Noble (1984) demonstrated in his history of industrial automation, not even something as "technical" as computerized numerical control (CNC) as value-free. Post-World War II concerns about social control topped the agendas of both the Air Force and CNC's industrial developers, a fact that still influences the evolution of automation.

#### ***Shamans Are Most Effective When They Control Processes in a Sensitive Way***

The only thing more formidable to a shaman than a world full of spirits is

a room full of kinsmen with a personal stake in the outcome. The most effective shamans I observed were those who controlled the tempo and tone of the proceedings through careful choreography and manipulation. Breaks from trancing that allowed for group discussions, postponements to other times, the use of humor—shamans had an array of techniques to influence the pace and direction of the intervention. Shamans told me that failure to maintain control could result in spiritual danger. But my own sense was that the more immediate casualty was likely to be the shaman's reputation.

A shaman's sensitivity in controlling processes and proceedings is critical to success. Shamanism is a double-edged sword. Although recognized as important contributors to community well-being, shamans are nonetheless treated with wary respect. His ability to control spirits is usually beneficial, but it can be used to do harm. The two-sidedness of the shaman's role inevitably leads to ambivalence and ambiguity among clients about the relationship.

Consultants, too, often assume the role of participant-facilitator. This position, while critical in providing the "outside perspective," can invite wariness in clients. Where our intervention brings change, we must address resulting insecurities and questions. Even when people recognize objectively that change is necessary, the process must be managed with sensitivity. Failure can make us the target for people's fears and anxieties. All of us have had to counter suspicions or accusations that we are interested only in selling the next engagement, that we don't have to live with our recommendations, or that we are using our experience with the

client to help other companies (usually competitors). "Managing the client relationship" is a skill that all consultants must master—and usually do after several well-deserved hits.

### *Shamans Span Boundaries, and Thus Offer Clients an Alternative View of Reality*

Shamans do what other mortals cannot: They transcend the boundary between the material and the spirit worlds. Altered states of consciousness are an effective way to tap into an alternative reality. When conventional perspectives on illness and healing fail, shamans can get their clients "out of the box" and into a world of spiritual power and (literally) extraordinary knowledge. Transcending the limits of everyday experience—and allowing others to benefit from that ability—is a critical feature of shamanism.

*Consultants will have to play therapeutic helping roles even in the process of being experts and doctors.*

To a large extent, the value added by a consultant also comes from an ability to cross boundaries—by contributing knowledge and expertise from other disciplines and industries, by forging links across internal organizations and functions, by sharing experiences and best practices from other clients. Brainstorming and retreats are our version of trance. They provide an arena to help clients suspend judgment, move beyond everyday thoughts, and gain an enhanced understanding of their world. Like shamans, we succeed best when we can

transport our clients to new levels of thought and action. For some clients, after all, creative and divergent thinking is an altered state of consciousness.

---

### *Conclusion*

---

In an essay on consulting in the 1990s, Edgar Schein (1990, p. 274) suggested that the decade's more complex problems and greater insecurities will change the relationships between consultants and clients.

My sense is that all consultants will have to become more able to deal with process issues and to play therapeutic helping roles even in the process of being experts and doctors. Only through such shared diagnostic work will they be able to identify what kind of expert advice or solutions will really be needed and what kinds of anxieties will be able to be dealt with.

This new mandate calls for a greater convergence between consulting and shamanism along at least two dimensions. First, successful consultants will find themselves adopting a more holistic approach to their craft. Shamans routinely address their clients' spiritual, social, and physiological needs. Increasingly, consultants, too, will need to pay more attention to the alignment of their clients' strategic, organizational, and individual structures and processes. The effectiveness of consulting "cures" will thus depend on the consultant's ability to integrate diagnoses and solutions at multiple levels.

Second, this approach will render strictly technical solutions a necessary, but not sufficient, element of effectiveness. As psychology plays a

bigger part in consulting interventions, success will depend not only on consultants' "expert knowledge" but also on their encouraging of such nonspecific factors as faith and belief.

In our post-industrial society, consultants are coming to realize they share with shamans a professional interest in healing and realignment. Ironically, perhaps, we are rediscovering and reaffirming the wisdom of a "primitive" expertise. ■

---

### *Footnotes*

---

1. The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional. Most Nepalese shamans are, in fact, male. A spirit familiar is a spirit with whom the shaman has developed a strong, trusting relationship—the shamanistic equivalent of "internal advocate."
2. This isn't the place to evaluate the effectiveness of shamanistic medicine. In defense of the practice, I say only that its apparent efficacy stems from the fact that most illnesses are either self-limiting, psychosomatic, or feigned as a means of raising sensitive personal and social issues in a culturally appropriate way. My own evidence (Blustain, 1976) indicates that Nepalese shamans have an admirable record of achievement for a range of illnesses. At any rate, a consultant asked to prove his or her effectiveness would be unlikely to offer evidence any less anecdotal or qualitative than would a shaman.

---

### *References*

---

- Blustain, Harvey. 1976. "Levels of Medicine in a Central Nepali Village." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 3:81-105.
- Noble, David F. 1984. *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Schein, Edgar H. 1990. "Models of Consultation: What Do Organizations of the 1990s Need?" *Consultation: An International Journal* 9(4):261-276.