



Internal Consultation

article by Chris Atkinson

Could high quality internal consultancy be a short cut to developing a powerful organisational culture?

Absolutely! argues Elysian's Director of Training Chris Atkinson.

Chris' six reasons why not to ignore this important area:

1) *Its simply good practice.* Consultancy is nothing more than understanding needs at great depth, therefore, if we operate as high quality internal consultants to colleagues and other departments it fosters a greater understanding of how the organisation works.

2) *Think before you leap.* So often it's easy to make decisions which impact our own departments positively, but have negative impacts on our colleagues elsewhere - formal and informal internal consultation helps us to ensure that our changes are not someone else's nightmare.

“Could high quality internal consultancy be a short cut to developing a more powerful organisational culture?”

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3) *Silo smasher.* In creating a culture of internal consultation, we help break down those invisible walls created by silo thinking, in the process opening up communication channels, and helping to understand deeply the challenges and functions of our colleagues.

4) *Building relationships.* When we get to better understand our colleagues professionally, it stands to reason we will get to know them more personally, turning another room full of people down the corridor into friends and colleagues.

5) *Management harmony* - while departmental leaders can benefit hugely from understanding the needs and challenges of their counterparts, they can also learn and share best practice too as part of the consultation process.

6) *Culture* - When we think about cultural development, we often think about top down, lengthy and complex processes to remove autocratic leadership styles. While this is absolutely correct in a traditional sense, there is no reason why a well-managed, solution-focused internal consultation between frontline/interdepartmental leaders cannot be a hugely valuable process in improving organisational culture.

Picture this recent example - A team leader is having problems because the data he finds on the internal system is never accurate. He phones the IT helpdesk and asks them to look at the issue, the IT team look into the programming of the system, they guess it is human error and make some alterations to ensure the data is better presented.

Another department who also use this system now discover that the data they normally input has now moved around and is less easy to enter based on their systems of working. As a result they start to make mistakes. Our original team leader calls the IT helpdesk again to say “thank you for the cosmetic changes but the system is still as bad as ever, maybe even worse now!”. The IT people feel unappreciated and that they have had their time wasted.

Now imagine scaling this behaviour to the level of a large complex organisation and think about the impact on your productivity and on your culture!

Let's picture the same scenario with the mindset of internal consultancy. The team leader on discovering the issue schedules some time with the department that enter the data, they sit with their counterpart and explore how the data is collated and how it is inputted. They discuss the reasons behind each step and the results that are expected; they explore ways that mistakes can be reduced and create a wish list to give the IT team.

They contact the IT team and explain what they have discovered and what they would like to see, the IT team member explores what they mean, why they need what they need and how they will be using the system in a practical hands on way.

The IT team member makes amendments based on what they have been told and goes back to the two originators with a 'draft' system change. They both agree if it works for them. The system is put 'live' after 1 week the two team members meet to discuss how the new setup is working, they are happy, they go and find the IT colleague to thank them for helping out.

This is not rocket science but it really does work!



Essential Checklist: *How to be an effective Internal Consultant*



- ✓ Listen.... a lot!
- ✓ Ask open questions, don't suggest (i.e. is it, is that, do you...etc) to avoid making assumptions about what other people think or want
- ✓ Make the time to explore and understand what other people think or want **BEFORE** making any recommendations
- ✓ Act collaboratively and ensure that both parties are equal stakeholders
- ✓ Be commercial, think about needs and results. Don't let history tie you to tradition!

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