



SSE Working Paper Series in Business Administration
No. 2014:1

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No 2014:1

October 2014

**EXPLORING THE MICRODYNAMICS OF INFORMAL EVALUATION –
THE CASE OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTING PROJECTS**

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EXPLORING THE MICRODYNAMICS OF INFORMAL EVALUATION – THE CASE OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTING PROJECTS

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how management consulting services are evaluated in client organizations. By building on an interview study with organization members in two client organizations and drawing on discourse theory, the current paper shows that clients seldom perform formal evaluations of consulting projects. Instead, the projects are evaluated informally. The findings from the empirical analysis indicate that this informal evaluation takes place through different types of talk, in which the projects and involved actors are given a discursively constructed worth. The paper contributes to the informal evaluation literature by shedding light on how the informal evaluation is carried out and how the worth of management consulting projects are discursively constructed by clients using frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk. It also highlights the importance of regarding the informal evaluation not only as an individual activity, but rather as shared among groups and socially, politically and contextually influenced. The paper also contributes to the management consulting literature by nuancing the hitherto homogenous picture of clients, and giving insights into the mechanisms behind why some projects are perceived by clients as more successful than others.

Keywords: management consultants, clients, informal evaluation, worth, discourse, talk

INTRODUCTION

What makes some management consultants more successful than others? A simple answer to this question is that for management consultants to succeed, they need satisfied clients willing to

purchase their services. While having satisfied clients is important in most businesses, it can be argued to be especially important for management consultants, as they to a large extent build on repeat business and sell their services via long-term client relationships, where having a good reputation, being recommended by one client to another, etc, are crucial (e.g. Kubr 2002; Armbrüster 2006). But despite its fundamental importance, little is actually known about how clients determine whether the management consulting services (MCS) provided were satisfactory or not, i.e., how they evaluate the services (Pemer 2008; Davidson et al. 2009). The current paper seeks to rectify this by exploring empirically how MCS are evaluated in client organizations.

Extant research in the field has shown that although the management consulting industry is fast-growing and organizations spend large sums of money on MCS (FEACO 2010), few clients make any evaluations of the management consulting projects – at least not in a formal or systematic way (Czerniawska 2006; Davidson et al. 2007; Davidson et al. 2009). A common explanation for this is that MCS are perceived by clients as very complex and difficult to evaluate, since they to a large extent are built on subjective and intangible qualities, and depend on the client-consultant collaboration (Clark 1995; Glückler and Armbrüster 2003). They also lack a clear profession, which makes it difficult for clients to know what they can expect from the consultants in terms of education and experience, etc (Kyrö 1995; von Nordenflycht 2010; Alexius and Pemer 2013). Moreover, performing an evaluation can be perceived as risky, as the collaborative nature of MCS implies that a failure may be – at least partially – the client's fault (for a more detailed discussion about perceived risks, see e.g. Mitchell 1994; Glückler and Armbrüster 2003; Pemer and Werr 2013). Another, related explanation is that many organizations traditionally have not had any formal rules or guidelines for how to use MCS. Instead it has been up to the individual actors in the client organizations to decide whether to hire

management consultants and to perform an evaluation of their services or not (Werr and Perner 2007).

Recently, however, attempts have been made to introduce more formalized processes for how to purchase, use and evaluate MCS (Werr and Perner 2007; Sieweke et al. 2012). As previous studies have shown, these attempts have not always been successful (Haferkamp and Drescher 2006). Rather they have been met with resistance from both managers and management consultants (Werr & Perner 2007). It has also proved difficult to find evaluation methods that can capture the variable, flexible and shifting nature of management consulting projects and at the same time enable standardized and measurable outcomes (Haferkamp & Drescher 2006; Davidson et al. 2007). Moreover, the evaluation methods have tended to focus on the management consultants' work, not taking the collaborative nature of MCS into account or evaluating the actions taken in the client organization, although they might be equally to measure (Haferkamp & Drescher 2006). But despite the common lack of formal evaluations of the management consulting projects, clients seem to "know" which projects were successful and not (compare Perner 2008). The question that arises then is how they "know" that?

To study this Skinner's (2004a; 2004b) concept of "informal evaluation" is used. This concept denotes the continuously ongoing process through which members on all levels in organizations give meaning to and evaluate situations. As organization members sometimes have different information, experiences and interests, they might informally evaluate the same situation differently. The informal evaluation is argued to be more common and powerful in situations where no formal evaluations are performed (Skinner 2004a) and where the situation does not have an inherent and objective *value* that can easily be measured, but rather a socially constructed *worth* (Guba and Lincoln 1989) – a characteristic that fits well with MCS. Less is however known about how the micro dynamics of the informal evaluation process. To explore

this and further the understanding for how clients evaluate MCS, a theoretical framework building on discourse analysis is used. The following research question is pursued: *How do clients informally evaluate management consulting projects?*

To answer the research question an explorative qualitative study of clients using management consulting services (MCS) have been carried out. The results from the analysis reveal how the organizational members use different types of talk to discursively construct a worth of the management consulting projects. The paper thereby makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the management consulting literature by explaining in more detail why some consulting projects are perceived as more successful than others and why understanding the context in the client organization is important. Second, it contributes to the informal evaluation literature by showing how the worth of consulting projects are constructed discursively by using frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk, thus highlighting the importance of seeing the informal evaluation as a contextually influenced practice.

The paper is structured as follows: first the theoretical framework is presented and discussed. Then the design of the study, the data collection and method of analysis are described. This is followed by a section in which the results from the analysis are presented. The paper ends with a concluding discussion in which the results from the study are discussed in relation to existing literature in the field and the study's contributions are described.

CREATING MEANING AND WORTH THROUGH TALK

To analyze and understand the discursive activities through which the worth of the consulting projects are constructed, the paper uses Marshak's (1998) model of different types of "talk" to illustrate how actors in organizations uses discourse to create meaning and – in this empirical

setting – evaluate consulting projects as more or less successful. Talk is here viewed as performing “an evaluative function”, implying that actions and events are given a certain meaning and worth based on “what we say about them” (Hardy et al. 1998; Marshak 1998:22).

The different types of talk Marshak defines are tool-talk, frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk. Tool-talk is usually intentionally objective and includes “all instrumental communications required to discuss, conclude, act and evaluate outcomes” (Marshak 1998:22). Frame-talk provides context and “the interpretative frameworks and symbols that generate and evaluate the meaning of discussions, conclusions, actions and outcomes” (Marshak 1998:22). It enables explicit and implicit assessments as well as subjective meanings and symbolic dimensions. Mythopoetic-talk, lastly, “creates and communicates the privileged narratives that guide frame-talk and tool-talk within a particular culture or society” (Marshak 1998:22). It can be compared with what Geertz (1975) refers to as *logos*, and is often mythic, metaphorical, intuitive and mystical. The three types of talk are related to each other through containment, and reinforce and re-create each other in “ongoing cycles of meaning, interpretation and events” (Marshak 1998:22). The relations and functions of the three types of talk are described by Marshak (1998:23) in the following way:

Mythopoetic-talk establishes the fundamental set of ideas that frame-talk applies selectively to form the interpretative context within which tool-talk addresses a particular issue. Any resulting actions and outcomes are then evaluated through further frame-talk in terms of how well the actions and outcomes fit/support a prevailing set of fundamental ideas. When actions and outcomes are interpreted by frame-talk as fitting or supporting the fundamental ideas, the cycle of meaning is reinforced, thereby continuing the cycle of self-referencing talk, meaning and action.

By talking about events and actions, such as management consulting projects, organizational members can draw on mythopoetic-talk to discursively create a worth in their frame-talk, in which they embed their tool-talk. In this paper we argue that although actors in organizations are relatively free to create their own versions of e.g. the project's worth and decide which parts of the mythopoetic-talk surrounding them they wish to draw on, they are still part of a larger context, both internally inside the organization and externally in their society. The contextual embeddedness restricts the actors' freedom in the sense that only some mythopoetic ideas will be available for them to draw on. It also influences the actors in the sense that they, due to their positions, political power games, etc, may not only have access to some parts of information about e.g. a consulting project. The paper thus investigates the meso level, and aims at bridging the gap between the micro processes, in which the actors in the organizations informally evaluate the projects, with their surrounding context (compare Chreim 2006). In sum, the informal evaluation of consulting projects as being more or less successful can – according to this framework – be understood as the result of framing processes, in which the consulting projects and their worth are constructed discursively.

METHODOLOGY

The paper builds on an explorative interview study performed in two companies, A-com and B-com (see table 1 below for an overview). The two companies were selected as they used consultants frequently, were large and belonged to different industries. The first two reasons were used as selection criteria as they were assumed to make the two companies more likely to have formalized structures in place for how to evaluate consulting projects in place. The third reason

was used to enable more variation in the answers than if the two companies had been very similar to each other.

	A-com	B-com
Type of industry	Service-oriented	Production-oriented
Number of employees	40 000 in Sweden	70 000 globally, whereof 25 000 in Sweden
Turnover	2 500 MEUR	19 000 MEUR
Culture	Strong culture often explicitly referred to, building on A-com's long history, the tradition of consensus-oriented leadership style, learning, and low self-confidence among the employees	The culture is not referred to as culture but as "normal" and "appreciated" ways of behaving, such as being business-oriented, having international experience, being rational and using a hierarchical leadership style
Number of interviews	24	18
Number of studied projects	13	8

Table 1. Overview over the two studied organizations.

The collected data consists of 42 semi-structured interviews with organization members on different positions in the organizations. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed, and it is on these transcripts the analyses are based. In the interviews, the interview persons were asked to describe consulting projects they knew of in their organization or had been involved in recently. One interview person could thus describe several projects. Questions were asked about the projects' scope, size, the use of consultants, how the project had been received in the organization and whether any evaluations had been performed. The interviews were complemented with documents and statistics from A-com and B-com

regarding their expenditures and use of consultants. This material was used as background information.

When analyzing and coding the data a three-step process inspired by Johnston's (1995) micro-frame analysis was used: First all interview transcripts were read to get an overview over the data. In the next step, the interview transcripts were sorted as to which consulting project they described and each transcript was read and reread carefully to identify what type of talk, i.e. tool-talk, frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk (Marshak 1998) was used in it and how. In the third step, lastly, the results from the previous step were compared over the data material to see whether any patterns could be discerned. One such pattern was that three groups of actors expressing similar ideas about the different projects could be discerned: project managers, project participants and stakeholders. The results from the analysis will be presented in more detail in the next section.

The discursive construction of consulting projects as successes or failures

This section is divided into three parts: In the first part, the lack of formal evaluation is discussed. In the second part it is shown how the interview persons discursively construct a worth of the selected consulting projects and the involved actors, and how these result in an informal evaluation of them. To avoid a too lengthy analysis section, two projects of the studied projects, one from A-com and one from B-com, are used here as illustrations. The reason they are used as examples is that they highlight well the mechanisms involved in the discursive framing of the projects and involved actors. The section ends with a brief discussion of the observed patterns in the informal evaluation.

Motivations for not evaluating projects formally

A first finding in the analysis was that no formal evaluations of consulting projects were performed in A-com and B-com. This was motivated by the interview persons in different ways. One was that performing an evaluation would be “irrelevant as numbers speak more than 200 pages or letters or so” (Division head, B-com), meaning that it was better to look at the actual impact of the project on the business than to read a report about it. Another explanation was that performing an evaluation would be “a waste of time”, as expressed by the vice CEO at B-com:

[But have you done an evaluation of the millions you have spent on the consultants and...] – No, and I don’t want to do it. It is a waste of time. I know for a fact that if you start counting on it that way then the numbers will be very bad. It is better for us to use that time on other things instead. But in some of our new products where things have gone wrong, there I want to do it. Go through the entire project, why did they do like that, who did it and how can we do it better next time. That is important for our new products that cost us 7 MEUR, I mean, that is no small money, and if we pay the consultants 1,5 MEUR or 0,2 MEUR, compared to 7 MEUR, that [the products] is much more important to me (Vice CEO, B-com).

However, some interview persons argued that performing evaluations would be valuable for their organization as it would enhance the organizational learning from the projects. In A-com templates for reports about the learning from projects had existed “for many, many years” and included questions about “what lessons have we learned and how can they be used in future projects” (HR-manager). That they despite that did not perform any evaluations or use the templates was explained by a lack of time and motivation in the organizations.

What we need is to make people start asking for information [about previous projects]. It is quite easy to create documents and banks of information and force people to put in new information there. But eventually they stop doing it anyway because no one asks for the information. (HR manager A-com).

A possible explanation for the observed differences in how the lack of formal evaluation was explained may be found in the mythopoetic ideas existing in the two organizations. In A-com there was a strong culture about learning, both from the employees and from consultants. This was reflected in the existence of templates for evaluations, but as they were not used they seemed to have a more symbolic function. In B-com, on the other hand, there existed a strong culture about being business-oriented. In the motivations for why no formal evaluations were performed, arguments were used in which the interview person could discursively construct himself as “focusing on the money” and thus acting in line with the norms in B-com.

The Distribution Project in A-com

The background of the Distribution project was that A-com historically and traditionally had sold its products and services via internally owned stores. As this structure had become very costly, a new distribution and sales structure was designed, in which A-com would sell its products and services via other stores working as agents for A-com. To manage this large restructuration, the Distribution project was started. A project manager was externally recruited and consultants hired. The project lasted for approximately two years and involved members throughout the entire A-com. As the project ended, the old internally owned stores had been closed down and been replaced with a new distribution net of external agents.

Project manager, Distribution project

According to the project manager, the Distribution project was a success. In the interview, she used frame-talk including metaphors such as “graduation day” and “pregnancy” to describe how the long and hard work in the project had resulted in high levels of satisfaction with the result, both from the employees and the customers. In this frame-talk she used elements of mythopoetic-talk and drew on the culture of A-com where there was a strong tradition to involve employees in all important decisions and to strive for consensus and anchoring. She also drew on A-com’s history and the fact that A-com was a company which many inhabitants in Sweden had opinions on, since they used its services and products on a regular basis and thus were affected by any changes made in the distribution system. That she and her project team in the Distribution project had managed to change the perceptions of the employees and the customers from being very skeptical towards being fully engaged in the change process and positive to the new distribution system was informally evaluated as a victory for the project and evidence for its success.

And this is one the strongest experiences I have made, that in every new area, when we get there, all the staff is there. And what has happened is that in only 3-4 days, they have changed the entire “costume”; new clothes, new logotype, new offices, new products, new equipment. Everything is new. And to see them [the employees] being so proud. We usually say that it is like graduation day. They stand there, washed, combed, in new clothes, just waiting to get praised. And then I give a speech and then there are customers and then we drink some champagne. Yes, I have never had a job before where I have experienced anything like this. Graduation day. Now it’s graduation. Look how nice it is.

In the frame-talk she also described how internal as well as external actors such as organizations having performed similar projects, had told her and her project members that the Distribution project “would never succeed”, and that it “would be impossible” to change the distribution system in such a short period of time. The fact that the project despite this had managed to deliver within the time frame was thus discursively constructed as an indicator of success. This was further strengthened by the project leader’s description of how other national and international organizations now contacted her to hear learn from the Distribution project. The project manager gave extra weight to this framing by saying that she herself was “very impressed” by the Distribution project.

In the beginning it was not that much, but now we are contacted by companies in Sweden, foreign companies in the same industry as A-com, universities, you [the Stockholm School of Economics], yes, a variety of constellations who are interested in how we dealt with this question and how we...they warned me for this, especially the ones who built new stores in the country, because we have worked a lot together with X [food store company], and they said that you will never be able to deliver on time. (...) But it has worked, everything has been put in place, and everything has been distributed and delivered on time. (...) I am very impressed by that.

Regarding the consultants, the project manager described them in very positive terms. She discursively constructed the idea of using “an upside-down pyramide model” consisting of mostly senior consultants and fewer junior consultants as innovative and helping the project achieve its goals. The project manager also described that she had been very careful to arrange for knowledge transfer between consultants and project members in the Distribution project, e.g.

by working in pairs. In this frame-talk the project manager used mythopoetic-talk elements and drew both on a business logic, prescribing that clients should be selective and choose carefully which consultants to use; on general ideas of the risk of becoming dependent on consultants and letting them take over the projects (compare Perner and Werr 2013); and on the culture in A-com implying that working with knowledge-transfer was very important when using consultants and seeing consulting projects as a means for improving the employees' skills. By drawing on these mythopoetic elements she constructed the project as "evidence of success" as it showed that she was aware of both of the business logic, of more general ideas about consultants and of A-com's culture, and that she had arranged the project so as to meet their different demands and avoid consultant dependency. It also allowed her to implicitly construct herself and her project team as acting in a wise and successful way.

In the beginning it was a little bit...the employees were very skeptical in the beginning and wondered what the consultants were supposed to do that they could not do. But gradually people started to realize how big the project was and then they changed their minds and realized that we would never have managed this by ourselves. [You worked in pairs in the project, was that decided before the project started?] That is to avoid becoming dependent on the consultants. There should always be an employee working with the consultants to learn from them, otherwise it becomes very expensive when you have to continue buying help from the consultants. (...) Sometimes I think people in A-com have low self-confidence and do not believe that they are good enough, and think that they need to buy help from consultants. But this wasn't the case in this project, since it was a large change project and it would

have been presumptuous to think that the employees would have time to manage both their regular jobs and working in the project. So there was never any doubt about that.

Project members, Distribution project

The project members combined tool-talk with frame-talk, drawing very little and rather implicitly on mythopoetic-talk about the culture in A-com. One example of this was found in the interview with a communication manager, who described the project as one of the reasons for why she had decided to leave her old employer to start working for A-com. By describing the project not only as “interesting” but also as “folksy” she created a link between the project and mythopoetic-talk about A-com’s culture, in which being folksy was regarded as a hallmark.

Regarding the use of consultants in the Distribution project, the project members used frame-talk building on mythopoetic-talk about the importance of working with knowledge transfer when using consultants (compare Perner and Werr, 2013). By first discussing how important it was to not “let the competence walk out with the consultants through the doors” and then describing with tool-talk how they had organized the project to make consultants and employees work in pairs or groups of three, they discursively constructed the use of consultants as following the norm and thus as legitimate.

Yes, that is... there is a risk that the knowledge walks out with the consultants through the doors. But...regarding this whole new Distribution project, there we have had a rather good mix [of consultants and employees]. I think it was said that it had to be at least one consultant per three employees. (...) I mean I can’t see that the competence has walked out with the consultants this far. I think everything has gone quite well. (...) (Division manager 1)

A common topic in all interviews about the Distribution project was the question of resource allocation. The project members described this as “not a big problem”, as most of the resources from the organization “only worked part time in the project whereas the consultants worked full time” (Division manager 2). One project member used mythopoetic-talk about how much consultants organizations should use in general and claimed that organizations sometimes buy “more hours than intellectual substance”. This was then used in frame-talk to make the consultants in the Distribution project an exception to the rule, as they had “done a wonderful job in the Distribution project” (Division manager 3).

Summing up, the project members discursively constructed the Distribution project as successful, that the consultants had been used in line with the norms in A-com and where the resource allocation between the organization and the project had not been a “big problem”.

Stakeholders, Distribution project

The stakeholders gave a rather different picture of the Distribution project in their interviews. Instead of using tool-talk or describing what happened in the project, as the project manager and the project managers did, they went directly for frame-talk inspired by mythopoetic-talk in their descriptions of the project. By drawing on mythopoetic-talk about employees in A-com being too dependent on consultants and not understanding that they would be able to carry out projects internally instead, they evaluated the Distribution project as at least partially a failure as it used “hoards of consultants” (vice CEO). In their descriptions, the Distribution project became a symbol and as an example of consulting projects where too much consultants were used.

In contrast to the project manager’s version, the stakeholders described the consultants as seeing the Distribution project as an opportunity to earn money and provide their junior

consultants with training. This was accomplished by drawing on mythopoetic-talk about consultants as being too junior, giving simplified advice and trying to expand their projects regardless of their clients' needs in order to earn more money (compare Perner and Werr, 2013). Interestingly enough, the stakeholders did not go into details or provide any tool-talk as evidence for the consultants behaving like that in the Distribution project. Instead they used frame-talk inspired by mythopoetic-talk (see above) to describe consultants and their behavior in general. This was then used to imply that since the Distribution project had used a lot of consultants and consultants could not be trusted, then the Distribution project and its managers had become "fooled by the consultants", which in turn was seen as a sign of weakness.

A common critique has been that there are a lot of junior consultants in nice suits who sit here and perform very simple tasks while we have assistants in-house who could have made a much better job to a much lower cost. One gets the feeling that these consultancies take the opportunity to send in people to do simple things just to make their business go around. And I think we could be better at stopping that. (Vice CEO, A-com)

By drawing on mythopoetic-talk about the culture in A-com the stakeholders also constructed the use of consultants as a result of the employees' lack of self-confidence and their – and especially their former CEO's – dependence on consultants. This had, according to the stakeholders, resulted in situations where the consultants – and not the employees – had made important decisions. To avoid similar situations to arise, "guiding principles" had been formulated and were now used in other projects as well (HR manager).

People here have a strong overconfidence in consultants. They have an enormous overconfidence in consultants. (...) Our previous CEO had an enormous belief in consultants. We have never had so many management consultants in A-Com as we did when [X] was CEO. There were KPIs and ratios in the Distribution project and it was always difficult to find good people internally, they said, and then they brought in more consultants instead. It was said that it should be two employees and one consultant, but when there were no good people to be found in A-com it became one-to-one instead. (Division manager 4)

The stakeholders also mentioned the resource allocation and explained the difficulties of staffing the Distribution project with internal resources with the culture in A-com. By using frame-talk and drawing on mythopoetic-talk about the importance of staffing the projects with employees and not consultants, the Distribution project was discursively constructed as breaking the norms and as “frightening” (Purchasing manager).

No, I don't know much about this Distribution project more than that it has been very big. But I know, and that is my personal opinion, that they had too many consultants. It felt as if they removed all the employees and their experience and replaced that with junior consultants. And that felt incredibly frightening (Purchasing manager)

Another example of this was that the employees were described as not seeing projects as a possibility of competence development but rather as a risk of losing their old job while working in the project. Moreover, the ideas of having more employees than consultants in the project was described as “an old and though question”, mostly driven by the unions who “always ask why we

use so much consultants” and “why we spend so much money on consultants when we say we can’t afford anything and fire people” (HR manager). By using this kind of frame-talk, the Distribution project became a symbol for more overarching organizational problems.

Summing up, in the stakeholders’ version of the Distribution project, almost nothing was said about the outcome or the background about the Distribution project, more than that it was “a large project” and “probably needed”. Instead, the stakeholders focused on other aspects such as the use of consultants and the resource allocation. By engaging in frame-talk and drawing on mythopoetic-talk about A-com’s culture and general conceptions about consultants, they informally evaluated the project as a failure and “an example of how things can go wrong” (Purchasing manager).

Framing the Distribution project

As illustrated above, the groups informally evaluated the project in different ways. The project manager and project members used mythopoetic elements of A-com’s culture and of a business logic to motivate their way of managing and performing the project. According to them, the project had followed the norms in A-com and managed to deliver the expected results on time. Their way of using consultants had been innovative, the consultants had contributed with both resources and knowledge to the project, and the project had organized well for knowledge transfer. By using frame-talk with words like “graduation day”, “success story” and “pregnancy”, the project manager and project members discursively constructed versions of the project in which it was informally evaluated as a success.

The stakeholders, on the other hand, were not as positive in their informal evaluation. They too used elements from A-com’s culture, but then to illustrate how the project broke the norms regarding e.g. the preferred employee-consultant ratio in projects. They also described the

consultants as being too junior and more focused on earning money than providing A-com with good knowledge and ideas. Comparing the project with the ideals they had constructed discursively, the project thus became informally evaluated as an “example of how things can go wrong”.

The Synergy Project in B-com

The background to the project was that B-com had initiated a merger with another company in the same industry: C-com. One of the ideas behind the merger was to achieve synergies. To identify and realize such synergies a number of projects were initiated. One of them was the Synergy project, which focused on identifying synergies between one part of B-com and one part of C-com in Europe. The project consisted of a project team with members from both B-com and C-com. Consultants were hired to function as facilitators and coordinators and the project lasted for six months. The project resulted in a number of suggestions and ideas which however never became implemented.

Project manager, Synergy project

The project manager described the project as working well in the beginning. The project teams and the top management teams in the two companies collaborated and shared a common view on what was to be achieved with the project. However, when it was time to implement the ideas from the project, resistance was built up on a local level in C-com. To explain this, the project manager used frame-talk, including elements of mythopoetic-talk about cultural differences between Nordic and Latin countries. In the frame-talk, he pictured the project manager at C-com, as a “typical Latin guy, although he actually was French” and “therefore could not be trusted to

follow agreements”. He also blamed the local CEO in C-com for obstructing the implementation “because he realized he would lose his job”.

After having lived five years in Brazil and been responsible for a number of markets there I know quite well how Latin people work. We agree upon going to the right. He goes to the right, but then he suddenly turns left. So unfortunately one cannot trust them fully. (...) We shared the same view, everything was OK and we calculated that we would be able to decrease the losses at C-com from 3 MSEK to 0,5 MSEK in just the first year. But when we started to implement our ideas, then the local CEO protested because he realized he would lose his job. And then that was that. And nothing happened. And then the exact same thing happened, we discussed it in Austria, we discussed it Switzerland, but when we started to implement and talk with the local people, then the CEO said that ‘No, this will not work’. (...) And so far, we have done nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. (..) But in the end, no decision could be taken. Because someone would have to give up something, and no one wanted to do that. (Project manager)

The project manager also used frame-talk to describe C-com as seeing to its own best, rather than to what would benefit the entire organization in the two merged companies. Again, this was explained by drawing on mythopoetic-talk about cultural differences between Nordic and Latin countries and companies. In the frame-talk, the project manager used formulations like “truth” and “all numbers were wrong” to strengthen his argument that he and his organization had been right, whereas the other organization had been more “selfish” and politically driven. All in all, the project manager described himself and his organization as working for the best of the entire

organization and being honest and trustworthy, whereas the actors in C-com were described in the opposite way.

We had a double project management in the sense that there was one guy from C-com and one guy from us. But the consultants also helped out. They created material, got material, analyzed material and delivered a recommendation. So that process worked very well, I think. (...) And then, and this is typical, we thought the material was very much in line with the data we had given the consultants, but the other organization thought that all numbers were wrong. Because it was the truth the consultants were showing and those numbers were not so good for the other organization, and then all numbers were wrong. So again, there was a little cultural difference, one could say...

(Project manager)

Regarding the consultants, the project manager drew on mythopoetic-talk about how consultants “should” be used and what consultants “were like” (compare Perner & Werr 2013). In his frame-talk he thus pictured consultants in general as working too much with standardized models and trying to sell in new projects “too early”, which he did not like.

The consultants, as you know, work like this that when they have done 80% of their job they start to sell in next project. That’s how it works. And there one has to be very decisive and strong and say that no, we only want this, we will have to wait with the other project ideas and see if we need it in the future. And I find it very tiresome that the consultants start too early to sell in next project. (Project manager)

He also highlighted the importance of knowing exactly what the consultants should do in the project before hiring them, and making sure that the organization really worked together with the

consultants to make the solutions and ideas tailor-made to the organization's specific needs. The project manager then compared the Synergy project to this ideal situation and described that the consultants, in this particular project, "actually managed quite well" and had provided the project with "good analyses and data".

I would like to say, as I did before, that they [the consultants] are very good at analyzing the data, find and collect data from different sources, put it together in a nice package and present it. They are very good at that. They are very professional, but it is just that when one has seen it so many times before, it sort of gives you the feeling that it is not tailor-made, it is very much a standard solution. And there your organization has to work together with the consultants so that you really get the tailor-made solution that helps you take the right decision.

The consultants were thus evaluated positively as "the good exception from the rule". That some of the ideas from the consultants had been "a bit too standardized" was described by the project manager as not being the fault of the consultants, but rather that the organization "had not had the time and resources to work as much together with the consultants as they would have wanted and needed". To strengthen his positive evaluation of the consultants as well as of himself, the project manager also used frame-talk to describe how the consultants had "been on his side" and how they, by being perceived as professional and trustworthy, had helped him make B-com understand what was important and reach for "the right decision".

And there I think the consultants were on my side and helped people change their ways of thinking. How should we work? And the aftermarket became, thanks to this project, more important. And for that I thank the consultants, because they really made it clear how important the aftermarket is for this business. We knew it already.

But to convince some people who were a bit unsure... [You said before that you could have done it yourselves, but would it have had the same effect?] No, I don't think so. So, it may be easier to convince people, because of course, when you have an external, a consultant, who people think is professional and who makes a good job, then it is easier. That is also something one can use consultants for... (Project manager)

The project manager also highlighted although most of the results from the project had not been implemented, his organization was using some of the analyses and recommendations from the consultants and that they had held very high quality. Taken together, the project manager thus discursively constructed ideals to which he compared the project, the consultants and the other involved actors. By drawing on mythopoetic-talk about national culture and about consultants, he put the blame for the lack of implementation on the actors in C-com, and described the consultants and himself as being honest and working for the best of the new merged organization. The reason for why the project had not succeeded entirely was thereby to be found outside the project, especially in C-com, whereas they who had worked inside the project had been doing their best to make it succeed.

Project member, Synergy project

The project member described the project as having been “necessary for B-com” but that it had not yielded any results. According to him the implementation was “zero”, despite the “quite good” suggestions made from the consultants. The project member explained the lack of implementation and results from the project by “the politics between the companies and the political games” inside C-com. He also referred to the restructuration in one of the organizational

divisions involved in the project as another reason for why the project had not yielded any results. The project member thus discursively constructed the project as important to the organization and the consultants as providing good ideas, but where the blame for the lack of results was put on especially C-com. Thus the discursively construction version served both as an indicator of the project's and of the project member's good intentions with the project, and as a means of questioning the credibility and professionalism of C-com.

Stakeholder, Synergy project

The stakeholder was not part of the project but was recruited to the position as European Division Manager at the time the project was drawing to an end. In the new position he became responsible for the division in B-com which the results of the project would affect. In the interview, the stakeholder described that he “was critical towards the project already before I had any responsibility for it”, as he thought it had not been anchored well in the organization, and that the project lacked a clear idea of how it would relate and contribute to the existing business and industry strategies in B-com. He also questioned the rationale behind the project and criticized the managers responsible for starting up the project for “not understanding what a commercial cooperation between two organizations really meant”. Moreover, he described how he had said that he would not take on the new position unless he was given full responsibility and freedom to decide which ideas from the project to implement in his division and how. The lack of anchoring and contribution of the project was however not blamed on the consultants, who on the contrary were described as “a must in this type of work where one has to find ways of integrating two cultures that have not yet got to know each other well”. Rather, he put the blame on his predecessor, who ”at that point of time [when the Synergy project had been initiated] had become

weakened in his role”, as a result of the ongoing political power games in the two involved organizations.

To strengthen this argument, the stakeholder used another consulting project as an example of how projects “should” be performed and anchored in the organization. This consulting project had been running at the same as the Synergy project and been led by the stakeholder. Moreover, it had involved many of the consultants who were also involved in the Synergy project.

Since, again, I think they had the wrong idea from the start. And then you can’t really use much from the project. But I think it could have been possible to do that. Because, I had a similar project with McKinsey at the same time as this project, and it was more or less the same consultants involved. And there were a couple of things that differed between the projects. My project was anchored in the organization and directly linked to its strategies. That made it easier for us to link the project’s guidelines with the organization’s guidelines. And that made a lot of other things much easier too. (...) But again, the lack of anchoring in the organization makes it difficult to know whether you can really use anything from the analyses made in the Synergy project. (European Division Manager)

Taken together, the stakeholder discursively constructed ideals of how projects “should be” and compared the Synergy project to it. The comparison resulted in a negative evaluation as the project did not meet the standards described by the stakeholder. The blame for why the project had not given any results was put on the managers initiating the project and their lack of both understanding for the situation and of power internally. The consultants were evaluated as valuable to use in projects like the EU project, and the reason they had not made any significant

contributions to the EU project was again the managers' lack of understanding for the situation and the intense political power plays.

Framing the Synergy project

The analyses revealed that the three actors made different informal evaluations of the Synergy project. The project manager used frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk about national culture to create a picture of C-com as breaking the norm of how one should act and depict him and the consultants as trying to see to the best for the newly merged organization. By putting the blame on C-com he also managed to create a picture where he had done what he could and that the lack of implementation was not his or the consultants' fault. This picture was somewhat confirmed by the project member, who also created a version according to which the "failure" of the project was the result of internal political power games in C-com. Interestingly enough, the project member did not use mythopoetic-talk in his frame-talk but rather made the explanation of internal power games sound like tool-talk. The project manager and the project member both informally evaluated the project as that it would have been successful had it not been for the behavior of the actors in C-com. The stakeholder, on the other hand, openly criticized the Synergy project and evaluated it informally as a failure. This was explained by the stakeholder by using frame-talk in which he used his own consulting project as a role model and showed how the Synergy project did not live up to the norms he had set for his own project. He also blamed the project managers in both B-com and C-com and described them as not understanding the importance of anchoring or how commercial cooperations work, which was something he as a manager valued highly.

Patterns in the informal evaluation

Comparing the results from the analyses of each consulting project revealed patterns in how organizational members evaluated the projects informally. A first pattern was that the informal evaluation seemed to be influenced by the individual member's role and relation to the consulting project. In the studied projects, the project managers and project members informally evaluated the projects as successful and the consultants as providing valuable help. In the case of the Synergy project, where the project had not been implemented, the project manager and the project member described it implicitly as that it would have been successful, had it not been for the managers in C-com and their "selfish" actions. The stakeholders, on the other hand, informally evaluated the projects negatively and criticized them, as well as the project managers and the consultants for being too resource-demanding, not acting professionally and for not following the norms in the organizations. They also described them as examples and symbols for organizational practices that did not function well, such as resource allocation to projects. Apart from indicating that the relation to the project influences the informal evaluation of it, this pattern also indicates that the informal evaluations were not only individual but rather shared in groups of actors with similar relations to the projects (compare Skinner 2004).

A second pattern was that the interview persons used different elements of mythopoetic-talk in their discursive construction of the projects. The interview persons from A-com all referred to the culture in A-com and used it to either construct their actions and the project as legitimate (e.g. the project manager describing how she had followed the norms in the culture about knowledge transfer by making the consultants and project members work in pairs), or to criticize the project (e.g. the stakeholder criticizing the Distribution project for replacing the employees' experience and knowledge with consultants). In B-com, on the other hand, no explicit references were made to its culture. Instead other mythopoetic ideas regarding the

importance of being business-oriented, national culture and how to use consultants were used in the frame-talk. What kind of mythopoetic-talk was used thus seemed to depend on what ideas were available, regarded as legitimate and holding a strong explanatory power in the different contexts. This pattern indicates that the construction of the worth of e.g. a management consulting project is an contextually influenced activity.

A third pattern, lastly, was that the members used other consulting projects in their frame-talk as examples of successes or failures. These projects were then used as examples of e.g. “a successful project”, as in the stakeholder’s evaluation of the Synergy project, in the frame-talk to create ideals to which the current project was informally evaluated. This indicates that organization members’ experiences from consulting projects and the framing of them as being more or less successful sediment and become part of both the individual member’s and the organization’s memories. Thereby they influence norms regarding what is a “legitimate” way of using consultants and performing consulting projects, and can be used in the informal evaluations of future consulting projects.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The paper set out to explore the microdynamics in the informal evaluation process by performing an empirical study of how management consulting projects are evaluated in client organizations. The empirical analyses revealed that in the two studied organizations, no formal evaluations of management consulting projects were performed, but still the interviewed organization members seemed to “know” which projects had been successful or not. This has been explained in the current paper by the organization members’ use of informal evaluation to give the projects a socially and discursively constructed worth (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Although the informal evaluation has received some attention in previous literature and been defined as a continuously

ongoing process in which organization members create meaning and evaluate situations (Skinner 2004a; Skinner 2004b), less has been known about how this almost invisible but powerful process is actually carried out, or what factors influence the outcome of it. The current paper thus contributes to the informal evaluation literature by showing how organization members use different types of talk, i.e. tool-talk, frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk (Marshak 1998), to discursively create ideals to which they evaluate the projects and the involved actors and give them a specific worth. It also contributes by revealing patterns in the informal evaluation. A first pattern was that the organization members' relations to consulting projects seemed to influence their informal evaluations of them. This can be explained by political games in the client organization, where some actors (i.e. the project manager and project members) had reasons to defend the consulting projects from critique as a "failed" project would damage their reputation, whereas other actors (i.e. the stakeholders) used the consulting projects to achieve goals or promote ideas such as decreasing the use of consultants in the organization in general. This finding thus indicates that the informal evaluation is not a neutral, individual process but rather influenced by the political games and different interests that might exist in client organizations. A second pattern was that different mythopoetic ideas were used in the discursive construction of the worth of the projects in the two organizations. This indicates that the context influences both what mythopoetic-talk can be used and consequently, which ideals can be discursively constructed and used in the informal evaluation. A third pattern, lastly, was that other consulting projects were used in the frame-talk as examples of how consulting projects "should be" (or not). As discussed above, this use of other consulting projects indicates that the informal evaluations of them sediment (compare Cooper et al 1996) in client organizations and become part of their and their members' memories and norms for how to use consulting services. Thereby it informs mythopoetic-talk used in frame-talk in the informal evaluation of current and future consulting

projects. The findings thus give empirical evidence to Marshak's (1998) model of "self-referencing cycles of meaning and experience". It also contributes by investigating empirically the unorganized talk among the organization members rather than directed sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991) efforts conducted by managers wishing to change their employees' perceptions of the projects.

Finally, the paper contributes to the management consulting literature by investigating empirically how clients evaluate consulting projects. So far, this literature has mostly focused on management consultants whereas the clients have been given less attention (Pemer 2008; Sturdy et al. 2009). Moreover, when clients have been studied, it has to a large extent been the client managers directly responsible for hiring consultants that have been in focus. Relatively little is therefore known about how other actors in client organizations respond to consulting projects or how the context in the client organizations affects the use of MCS and their perceived worth (Pemer 2008). Although studies have been made on how management consulting projects are formally evaluated (Davidson et al. 2007; Davidson et al. 2009) the informal evaluation processes that are continuously ongoing in client organizations and which seem to have a large influence on the consulting projects' and the involved actors' reputations have not gained much attention (Pemer 2008). By showing how organizational members on different levels and with different relations to consulting projects engage in informal evaluations of them, and what factors influence the outcome of the process, the paper contributes to the understanding of why some consulting projects are seen as more successful than others. This insight is central for both management consultants and client organizations as it indicates that it is not enough to focus on delivering a "good" project that meets the predefined goals (if there are any). Rather, it must take the unorganized informal evaluation with its interaction between discursive, political processes on a micro level and contextual factors on a macro level such as culture, memories of other

consulting projects and business and management ideals, into consideration. If not, the management consulting project risks becoming perceived as an anomaly that breaks the “flow of stability” (compare Weick 1995) and inadvertently gives rise to increased framing activities among the organization members. The findings also highlight the importance of communication, as management consulting projects that are not communicated well, anchored with the stakeholders or formally evaluated, risk falling prey to the political powers in the client organization as the informal evaluation processes then can become too “untamed”.

Summing up, the paper has shown how consulting projects are informally evaluated in client organizations and identified factors influencing the outcome of this process. It has also highlighted the importance of understanding the context in the organization as it is used in frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk to discursively create ideals to which the consulting projects are evaluated. The findings indicate that the informal evaluation process is powerful and important to understand, but also that consulting projects’ worth are more dependent on how well they fit with the social and political context in the client organization than on the actual performance and outcomes of them.

Managerial implications

The findings presented in the paper have several implications for both clients and management consultants. For clients, the results indicate that it is very important to anchor consulting projects well in the organization and to ensure that it follows the norms for how to use consultants that exist in the organization. Should the project not follow the norm, more communication and motivation of the project is needed, as it breaks the “flow of steadiness” in the organization and may become regarded as an anomaly, which in turn opens up for critique. It is therefore of utmost importance that the project manager (or anyone in a similar position) takes on the role of

communications manager and ambassador for the project and spends time and energy on communicating with the organization members on why the project is needed and why it is organized the way it is. The project manager and project managers should also be aware of what other consulting projects have been performed in the organization before, and what reputation they have got and why, as the memories of these projects can be used in frame-talk among the organization members to evaluate current projects informally. As the informal evaluation can be powerful and difficult to stop, it may also be worth considering for the clients to actually make formal evaluations of the projects as that can reduce some of the power of the informal evaluation (compare Skinner 2004).

For consultants, the findings in the paper indicate that it is not enough to focus on delivering a “good” project with “good” results. Rather, the consultants must be aware of how they and their project are perceived in the client organization and how well they fit with the norms in it for how to use consultants. As it can be difficult for the consultants to communicate directly with the organization without losing credibility, they need to help their client (e.g. the project manager) take on the role as communicator and anchor the project in the organization. As the worth of the project is contextually dependent (compare Guba and Lincoln 1989), the consultants need to spend time on understanding the culture in the client organization and what role they and their client play in it.

A last implication for both clients and consultants is that not only those who are directly affected by the projects should be considered as stakeholders, but that there might be other actors as well in the organizations who perceive themselves to be stakeholders, although they do not have that formal role. As these actors may be influential in the organization and according to the findings in this paper tend to be negative towards the projects, the clients and the consultants need to identify them early on and anchor the project with them. This highlights again the

importance of including the context in the analyses of how to communicate and with whom in the client organization to win acceptance for the project and reduce resistance.

Future research

Future research should explore whether the patterns identified in the current study can be found in other organizations too. As the interview study was performed in only two organizations and only focused on management consulting projects, it needs to be established whether the informal evaluation process and the factors influencing the outcome of it looks the same in other contexts and in other types of projects and events. Future research also needs to continue exploring the creation and shaping of ideals and how this is influenced by contextual factors, as the results from this study indicate that the context does play a central role. Lastly, the findings from this paper highlight the importance of including the clients in the analyses, as they play a central role in the construction of consulting projects as more or less successful. More specifically, more research is needed on how client organizations use, purchase and evaluate MCS, and how contextual factors inside and outside of the client organization affect the clients' behavior towards management consultants.

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