

Like the circus performer, a consultant has to keep many plates spinning: current work, imminent work, potential work; it all needs to be thought about, planned for, done and reviewed.

A Day in the Life of an Ashridge Consultant David Birch



It's a new client for me today. No matter how many times I do this, I always feel a mixture of excitement and anxiety before a first meeting. I relax a little and soak up the atmosphere as I wait for Sarah's assistant to collect me. It feels like a friendly sort of place – someone's just had a baby and there's a buzz of excitement over names and photographs.

I've already been briefed about the client by my colleague Lindsey, who's been leading our work there since the Spring. It's a major international charity, beset by a host of chronic problems that their new CEO, Sarah, is determined to tackle. Sarah has asked us to work with her top team of seven, to help her create a sense of urgency and collective ambition that would enable them to build a sustainable long term future for the business. Lindsey has suggested that I help facilitate an executive team workshop planned for the end of next month, so today is about getting to know the organisation and some of the people I'll be working with.

After a round of introductions and an explanation of my role, Sarah sets out the day's agenda. She wants the morning to be 'discursive', exploring the challenges facing the organisation, then the afternoon should be about making some decisions in terms of the way forward. As the meeting gets underway, I go into 'fly on the wall' mode, which amounts to intensive listening, observation and note taking. This is actually quite hard work: I find that it takes stamina to stay on top of the content while paying attention to the process for long periods of time.

After lunch, Sarah invites me to comment on the morning. This is my opportunity to establish myself with the team or to blow my credibility

entirely! I make some general observations about the group process rather than singling people out for special attention. I say that as a group they seem to be ready to engage with the issues and show a high level of commitment to tackling them. I also mention I've seen a lot of 'advocacy' in the group; not surprising in a group of senior managers like this! As well as their propensity to offer ideas and direction, they are also good at supporting what others say – but quite often with a twist: they will support and then add their opinion, which often turns out to be quite different to the point they were agreeing with a moment before!

However, I carefully comment that I've not seen them express much in the way of straightforward disagreement. Perhaps this is an area for them to reflect on? This provokes laughter and an exchange of glances around the room, which suggests to me that I've touched on a sensitive topic. I hope that my comments will stimulate some more honest exchanges in the group during the afternoon.

I don't have long to wait! Sarah's case for the establishment of a special working group to investigate some of the more radical strategic options on behalf of the executive, provokes an animated debate. People voice their support or concerns about the proposal in a much more straightforward way than they had been in the morning. There's a noticeable change in atmosphere – livelier, more engaged, less polite and guarded. Might this have something to do with my feedback? Although I'm always cautious about attributing cause and effect in the realm of human relationships, it certainly feels as if my comments might have had an impact on the

team. I reflect on how 'less' can so often equal 'more' in the world of consulting. Maybe words carry more weight when used sparingly?

The afternoon goes well, with several important decisions made and a clear plan of action agreed.

Back in Sarah's office, we review the day. I find her very easy to talk to and share some of my observations about her leadership style. Most of what I have to say was very positive, but I am able to challenge her a little about the potential for her growing frustration and impatience to actually inhibit progress. We talk about this for a while and I leave feeling that a useful day has been spent, I have learned a lot about the organisation and the executive team and I feel that I have got off to a good start with Sarah.

Returning to the car, I check into my voicemail and here a message from our office manager Duncan, who tells me that he's had a great idea: why don't I write the next 'A Day in the Life' article for *Converse*? Flattery still works a treat with me and in no time I agree to take it on. But which day to choose? "Why not today?" I suggest to Duncan – so this article begins to take shape in my mind.

I break my journey home for a brief catch-up over a glass of wine with a former colleague and I reflect with him on how our role as consultants is less about 'facilitating change' and more about 'developing sustainability' in organisations. Today may have been a gentle start, but I feel it was worthwhile and important in preparing Sarah and her team to establish ways of communicating that will ensure their business will have long term sustainability.