

STEP BY STEP CONFIDENTIAL PEER CONSULTATION

By Gene L. Morton

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Would you like to have someone you can call to work through a complex career challenge? Would it be useful to hear how experts in your field would work their way through your tricky problem, sharing their experience and knowledge? Would you consider novel interventions, and the methods and details of memorable, relevant consulting projects?

From 1980-2015 members of Associated Consultants International (ACI) developed and used a peer consultation method for ethical career and practice development issues. Gene Morton wrote the original paper describing this process, asked for it to be peer reviewed by the ACI membership, and made any revisions.

Why Participate In a Peer Consultation

- To improve one's effectiveness in specific situations.
- Gain insights into and "reality check" a specific matter.
- Hear how others have worked through similar situations.
- Develop a personal improvement plan.
- Plan how to reduce the risk of mistakes and violated expectations.
- Foster learning and continuous improvement.

Situations Around Soliciting a Peer Review

1. What are some concerns, problems or situations where you would like the input of others?
Example: I have a difficult client situation and do not know how best to proceed. I can describe what the issue is, what's been done so far, what I guess may be blocking progress. I'm not clear about how to proceed.
2. Who would you call to be a confidential member of a peer review panel?
Example: They would be likely to understand the details of my situation. They have the technical expertise I need in order to address my situation.
I have no concerns about their ability to maintain confidentiality.
3. What stops you from using your colleagues in consultations or coaching encounters?
 1. Power differences, status differences, trust issues, availability
 2. Not sure how they will use my information
 3. Not sure if they will keep my concerns confidential

This Peer Consultation process was designed to provide an efficient, structured process for utilizing talent and expertise from support groups and organizational units. The entire process can be confidential.

Clients also use peer review sessions to make progress toward personal goals in important aspects of their career, work or relationships.

Definition of A Confidential Peer Consultation

Peer consultation is a structured process used to seek the counsel of knowledgeable and experienced colleagues. There is a Requester, a panel of colleagues who are Peer Reviewers, and a Facilitator. In a consultation, first the peers listen as the Requester describes the situation. Peers then clarify, express non-judgmental views, generate suggested solutions and offer feedback. The requestor sits and listens, does not interrupt, but does ask clarifying questions. The Facilitator stops any discussion. The goal is diversity of input, not discussion.

The colleagues selected to sit on a client's consultation are chosen for their relevant knowledge, experience and skills. Ultimately, the members of a peer panel are those who are empathetic and whose points of view, experiences or expertise are valued and respected.

The facilitated consultation process efficiently satisfies the immediate needs of the client, and the peer consultants learn also. The process enables peers to share experiences, ideas and perspectives in ways that maintain one's privacy and self-worth. During a peer consultation, the client is able to hear divergent points of view with a minimum of defensiveness. No participant dominates the process.

Roles in the Peer Consultation Process

1) The Requestor who asks for a peer consultation completes the following steps.

Selects a Facilitator (see below)

- Works with the facilitator to select the peer consultants.
- Chooses and presents the situation of interest or concern.
- Listens, clarifies, and confirms for understanding what peers offer (agreement is not required for understanding to occur).
- Is solely responsible for any follow-through actions.
- At the conclusion, summarizes what stands out as significant and most useful.

2) The Peer Reviewers are those who have agreed to meet with the client and give their input to the client's issue. The peer reviewers are expected to contribute in the following ways.

- Focus exclusively on client's situation or request.
- Listen, ask questions for clarification and seek to understand the client's interest or concerns.
- At the appropriate times, share personal experience, knowledge and skills related to the area of interest or concern to the client.
- Provide ideas useful for a deeper understanding of the situation and its resolution or movement.
- Avoid comments or feedback unrelated to the client's situation. Judgments, speculations and stereotypes are not useful. Personal criticisms are not permitted.

3) The Facilitator is a person selected by the client to set up, help organize and guide the consultation process. The facilitator contributes in these ways.

- Promptly responds to a request for peer counsel – agree to either serve or decline.
- Helps the requestor identify a qualified peer group.

- Helps the requestor prepare for the presentation of her or his case situation.
- Preserves the context of acceptance and keeps the focus on the issue not the requestor: Assures the meeting follows to the consultation process, maintains the peer relationship and works toward a useful outcome.
- Helps the requestor summarize the meeting at the end.
- Checks with the peer group at the end about what they have gained for themselves.

Step-By-Step Preparation For and Facilitation of a Peer Consultation:

Before the meeting:

- The person identifies a group of peers willing to confidentially peer consult.
- An hour and a half meeting time is chosen.
- A group member is asked or volunteers to be the facilitator.
- The person prepares a situation description, working with the facilitator.

At the in-person (physically or electronically) peer review meeting:

- The Facilitator goes over the ground-rules and promises to ensure they will be kept.
- The Facilitator records the comments either by transcription or video.
- The Requestor presents the situation description.
- The invited Peer Consultants each respond in turn to the situation, sharing what they would do if this were their situation. There is no discussion.
- The Facilitator attends to keeping comments short and stopping discussions.
- There may or may not be a round two, where people incorporate what they heard from others and offer any further ideas.
- A Thank You exchange mentioning lessons learned by each peer reviewer closes the meeting.

After the meeting:

- The facilitator hands over re meeting notes/video to the person. No copies are kept by anyone else.
- The Requestor may or may not cherry-pick from the many ideas, selecting what will best resolve this most difficult practice issue. Often the answer is a combination of the ideas.
- It is pleasant but not necessary to let the peer review members know what happened in the consultation.

Expectations of Peer Consultation

This peer group is assembled for the purpose of this consultation. The peers are not expected to provide any added support.

The process structure is designed to maximize clear communication and to minimize power differences in work and personal relationships. Thus, the requestor may ask their superior be a “peer” for the purposes of this consultation. To minimize differences in influence, the process design minimizes the effects of hierarchy, gender, race, education, prestige, expertise and some of the other trappings of status. Experienced and seasoned professionals can learn from novices as well as from other experts.

Example of Peer Consultation Process Steps

Set Up

1. Requestor contracts with a facilitator.
2. Requestor and facilitator plan the logistics: Where, when, how, and who to invite.
3. Requestor invites peers.
4. Requestor and facilitator meet to prepare the information, which can be disguised to protect confidentiality:
 1. The title, headline or summary statement that best describes the case or issue of concern.
 2. Ground rules for distribution.
 3. A brief summary of the case (two to three sentences).
 4. Desired outcomes. (It is useful to have these visible to the peer reviewers).
 5. A description of the circumstances of the situation: might include an organization chart (positions), process map, or other useful background information. These are available for the peer reviewers, sometimes in advance if desired.
5. If the meeting is in person, determine arrangement to encourage equitability (round or U, fishbowl, fly on the wall, or another arrangement.)
6. The facilitator, or a recorder, takes notes or (only if agreed to by all in advance) the peer consultation is recorded.

Ground Rules

The peer review panel members review the ground rules in advance of the consultation.

- Confidentiality: The client, the client's issue, concerns and the outcomes of the consultation are confidential and not discussed elsewhere.
- Listen as an ally, for understanding.
- All participants are treated as colleagues, all at the same level.
- Relax personal constraints – Provide counsel in relation to what the client needs, not just what is feasible. The requestor decides what is feasible.
- Begin by saying “If this were my situation I would...” Strive for brief, focused and clear remarks.
- Do not waste time justifying any position or point of view.
- Avoid recycling and repeating the same comments.

Meeting Agenda

The facilitator serves as the timekeeper and keeps the process on track. The facilitator also maintains the ground rules.

First fifteen minutes: Situation Explanation

- Facilitator manages the introductions and reviews the ground rules.
- The Requestor gives a brief explanation of why people were asked to participate.
- The Requestor states desired outcomes from this peer consultation, “What I would like to gain is....”
- The Requestor presents the topic and an overview of the situation at hand – a brief summary, how success is defined in this situation, and a description of the situation. It is not necessary to

share names or other specific identifiers.

- The facilitator checks for understanding of the desired outcomes.

Next ten minutes: Clarification

The peer reviewers ask questions only to gain more understanding of the issue. The client can respond with further clarifications or say “I don’t know” or “I can’t tell you that and keep my client’s confidentiality.” The peer reviewers offer no advice, comments, feedback or reactions to the situation at this time.

Next 20-45 minutes: Ideas and Solutions (length depends on number of reviewers)

- Focusing on the situation, each member of the peer review panel takes a turn sharing ideas, examples and/or methods for achieving the client’s outcomes. It is useful to say “If this were a situation I was in, I would....”
- The Requestor listens, only asking questions for clarification.
- A person may seek further information in order to explore the meaning of a comment. There is no need to argue or to defend any position or point of view.

Closing ten minutes: Learning and Action Ideas

- The Requestor can but does not need to restate useful points heard and any actions intended. The client need not justify, defend or discuss reasons.
- The peer panel members take turns briefly stating what they learned during the process. That is, they provide a brief recap of what they each learned.
- The Requestor thanks panel members and facilitator.
- The Facilitator adjourns the session.

Follow Through

The peer panel members may or may not be advised about what happened as a result of the peer consultation session. The gift is in the reciprocity of sharing concepts and methods. What solutions were chosen, what action was taken and what long-term benefit was gained from the consultation is not the focus of the peer review process.

Results of Participation In a Peer Consultation

Both Requestors and Peer Consultants reported numerous benefits.

- Requestor’s insights resolve confusion, hesitations.
- Possible solution pathways are generated.
- Learn peer solutions for similar situations.
- Develop a personal improvement plan.
- Learns how to reduce client and Requestor risk
- Fosters learning and continuous improvement.

Thank you for exploring this method of Peer Consultation. We wish you the very best results as you put it in place in your life and practice.

Example Meeting Agenda

(Prepared by Gene L. Morton)

Peer Consultation Meeting Agenda

Objective: We meet today to provide peer consultation on a specific situation.

Ground Rules

- The situation, facts and statements of concern are confidential, not to be discussed outside this group.
- Listen as an ally, for understanding.
- Treat one another as colleagues, as equal authorities and resources for the client, with equal influence in this situation.
- Confidentiality: The consultant, the issue, concerns and the outcomes of the consultation are confidential and not discussed with others.
- Relax personal constraints – provide counsel in relation to what is needed, not what is feasible. The client will decide what is feasible.
- Make remarks brief, focused, and clear.
- Do not take up time by justifying one position or point of view.
- Avoid recycling and repeating the same comments.

Meeting Agenda

First fifteen minutes:

Introductions

Explanation of the situation and definition of success, desired outcomes

Next ten minutes: Issue clarification

The peer panel members ask questions to gain more understanding of the topic of concern or issue. The peer panel offers no advice, comments, feedback or reactions to the situation at this time.

Next ? minutes: Ideas and solutions – Round the Room

Each member of the peer panel takes a turn sharing their reactions and ideas for achieving the desired outcomes in this situation. Questions are asked only for clarification. There is no need to argue or to defend any position or point of view.

Closing ten minutes: Learning and action ideas

- The Requestor can but does not need to restate useful points heard and any actions intended. The client need not justify, defend or discuss reasons.
- The peer panel members take turns briefly stating what they learned during the process. That is, they provide a brief recap of what they each learned.
- Thanks to panel members and facilitator. Facilitator adjourns meeting.