# Timed Consultancy Protocol

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A Consultancy is a structured process for helping an individual, or a team; think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma. Outside perspective is critical to this protocol working effectively; therefore, some of the participants in the group must be people who do not share the presenter's specific dilemma at that time. When putting together a Consultancy group, be sure to include people facing differing perspectives. All Consultancy dilemmas and conversations should be kept in strict confidence.

**Time:** Approximately 50 minutes
**Roles:** Presenter (whose work is being discussed by the group)
   Facilitator (who sometimes participates, depending on the size of the group)

**Steps:**
1.  **(5 – 10 minutes)** The presenter gives an overview of the dilemma with which s/he is struggling, and frames a question for the Consultancy group to consider. If the presenter has brought student work, educator work, or other "artifacts," there is a pause here to silently examine the work/documents. The focus of the group's conversation is on the dilemma. The success of the Consultancy often depends on the quality of the presenter's reflection as well as on the quality and authenticity of the question framed for the group. However, it is not uncommon for the presenter, at the end of the Consultancy, to say, "Now I know what my real question is." That is fine, too.

1.  **(5 minutes)** The Consultancy group asks clarifying questions of the presenter – that is, questions that have brief, factual answers. Clarifying questions are for the person asking them. They ask the presenter "who, what, when, where, and how." These are not "why" questions. They can be answered quickly and succinctly, often in a phrase or two.

2.  **(10 minutes)** The group asks probing questions of the presenter. Probing questions are for the person answering them. They ask the presenter "why" (among other things), and are open-ended. They take longer to answer, and often require deep thought on the part of the presenter before s/he speaks. These questions should be worded so that they help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about the dilemma presented to the Consultancy group. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question s/he framed or to do some analysis of the dilemma presented. The presenter may respond to the group's questions, but there is no discussion by the Consultancy group of the presenter's responses. At the end of the ten minutes, the facilitator asks the presenter to restate his/her question for the group.

3.  **(15 minutes)** The group talks with each other about the dilemma presented while the presenter listens. When the group talks, it is helpful for the presenter to pull his/her chair back slightly away from the group. This protocol asks the Consultancy group to talk

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about the presenter in the third person, almost as if s/he is not there. As awkward as this may feel at first, it often opens up a rich conversation, and it gives the presenter an opportunity to listen and take notes, without having to respond to the group in any way. It is the group's job to offer an analysis of the dilemma or question presented. It is not necessary to solve the dilemma or to offer a definitive answer. Members of the group sometimes do suggest solutions to the dilemma. Most often, however, they work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively.

Possible questions to frame the discussion:

- What did we hear?
- What didn't we hear that they think might be relevant?
- What assumptions seem to be operating?
- What questions does the dilemma raise for us?
- What do we think about the dilemma?
- What might we do or try if faced with a similar dilemma? What have we done in similar situations?

4. **(5 minutes)** The presenter reflects on what s/he heard and on what s/he is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that particularly resonated for him or her during any part of the Consultancy. The point of this time period is not for the presenter to give a "blow by blow" response to the group's conversation, nor is it to defend or further explain. Rather, this is a time for the presenter to talk about what were, for him/her, the most significant comments, ideas, and questions s/he had while listening to the Consultancy group.

5. **(5 minutes)** The facilitator leads a brief conversation about the group's observation of the Consultancy process. Debriefing the process is key. Don't short-change this step.

# Framing a Consultancy Dilemma and Question

Write no more than a one-page description of a dilemma related to your practice. End your description with a specific question. This question will help your Consultancy group focus its feedback.

Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling – something that is problematic or has not been as effective as you would like it to be – anything related to your work. Consultancies give presenters an opportunity to tap the expertise in a group. The Consultancy group should provide respectful, thoughtful, experience-based responses to your dilemma.

Consultancies do not go well when people bring dilemmas that they are well on the way to figuring out themselves, or when they bring a dilemma that involves getting other people to change. To get the most out of this experience, bring something that is puzzling you about your practice. It is riskier to do, but we guarantee that you will learn more.

All Consultancy dilemmas and conversations should be kept in strict confidence.

Following are some suggestions to frame your consultancy dilemma and question.

1.  Think about your dilemma.

    Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling or about which you are unsure. Some criteria for a dilemma might include:

    -   Is it something that is bothering you enough that your thoughts regularly return to the dilemma?
    -   Is it an issue/dilemma that is not already on its way to being resolved?
    -   Is it an issue/dilemma that does not depend on getting other people to change (in other words, you can affect the dilemma by changing your practice)?
    -   Is it something that is important to you, and is it something you are actually willing to work on?

2.  Do some reflective writing about your dilemma. Some questions that might help are:

    -   Why is this a dilemma for you?
    -   Why is this dilemma important to you?
    -   If you could take a snapshot of this dilemma, what would you/we see?
    -   What have you done already to try to remedy or manage the dilemma?
    -   What have been the results of those attempts?
    -   Who do you hope changes? Who do you hope will take action to resolve this dilemma? If the answer is *not you*, you need to change your focus. You will want to present a dilemma that is about *your* practice, actions, behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions – not *someone else's*.
    -   What do you assume to be true about this dilemma, and how have these assumptions influenced your thinking about the dilemma?

# Framing a Consultancy Dilemma and Question

- What is your focus question? A focus question summarizes your dilemma and helps focus the feedback. (See the next step.)

3. Frame a focus question for your Consultancy group. Put your dilemma into question format.

  - Try to pose a question around the dilemma that seems (to you) to get to the heart of the matter.
  - Remember that the question you pose will guide the Consultancy group in their discussion of the dilemma.

4. Critique your focus question.

  - Is this question important to my practice?
  - Is this question important to service learning?
  - Is this question important to others in my profession?

5. As part of your preparation for your consultancy, ask your facilitator or a colleague to help you refine your thinking about your dilemma and focus question by asking you a few clarifying and probing questions. Remember, clarifying questions can be answered briefly, are informational, and help you (the presenter) clarify.

# Pocket Guide to Clarifying and Probing Questions for Consultancy Protocol

The distinction between clarifying questions and probing questions is very difficult for most people working with protocols. So is the distinction between probing questions and recommendations for action.

**Clarifying Questions** are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that the participants can ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol. Clarifying questions are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter's dilemma. They have brief, factual answers, and don't provide any new "food for thought" for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: *Does the presenter have to think before s/he answers?* If so, it's almost certainly a probing question.

**Examples of Clarifying Questions:**
- How much time does the project take?
- How were the students grouped?
- What resources did the students have available for this project?

**Probing Questions** are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a question does not have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself saying, "Don't you think you should…?" you've gone beyond the probing question. The presenter often does not have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

**Since probing questions are the hardest to create productively, we offer the following suggestions:**
- Check to see if you have a "right" answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don't ask it.
- Refer to the presenter's original question/focus point. What did s/he ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
- Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter's agenda. Sometimes a simple "Why?" asked as an advocate for the presenter's success can be very effective, as can several "why" questions asked in a row.
- Try using verbs: What do you fear? Want? Get? Assume? Expect?
- Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk, and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don't avoid risk, but don't push the presenter into the "danger zone."

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# Pocket Guide to Clarifying and Probing Questions for Consultancy Protocol

- Think of probing questions as being on a continuum, from recommendation to most effective probing question. The following examples are from an actual Consultancy session in which a teacher was trying to figure out why the strong math students in the class were not buying in and doing their best work on what seemed to be interesting math "problems of the week":

    - You could have students use the rubric to assess their own papers (Recommendation restated as a question)
    - What would happen if students used the rubric to assess their own work? (Recommendation restated as a probing question)
    - What do the students think is an interesting math problem? (Good probing question)
    - What would have to change for students to work more for themselves and less for you? (Better probing question)

**In summary, good probing questions:**
- Are generally and widely useful
- Don't place blame on anyone
- Allow for multiple responses
- Help create a paradigm shift
- Empower the person with the dilemma to solve his or her own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Avoid yes/no responses
- Are usually brief
- Elicit a slow response
- Move thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourage taking another party's perspective

**Some final hints for crafting probing questions.** Try the following questions and/or question stems. Some of them come from Charlotte Danielson's Pathwise work, in which she refers to them as "meditational questions".

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for…?
- What do you feel is right in your heart?
- What do you wish…?
- What's another way you might…?
- What would it look like if…?

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**Pocket Guide to Clarifying and Probing Questions for Consultancy Protocol**

- What do you think would happen if…?
- How was…different from…?
- What sort of impact do you think…?
- What criteria did you use to…?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before?
- What might you see happening in your classroom if…?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude…?
- What is your hunch about…?
- What was your intention when…?
- What do you assume to be true about…?
- What is the connection between…and…?
- What if the opposite were true? Then what?
- How might your assumptions about…have influenced how you are thinking about…?
- Why is this such a dilemma for you?

## Some Examples of Probing Questions:

- Why is a "stand-and-deliver" format the best way to introduce this concept?
- How do you think your own comfort with the material has influenced your choice of instructional strategies?
- What do the students think is quality work?
- You have observed that this student's work lacks focus – what makes you say that?
- What would the students involved say about this issue?
- How have your perspectives on current events influenced how you have structured this activity?
- Why aren't the science teachers involved in planning this unit?
- Why do you think the team hasn't moved to interdisciplinary curriculum planning?
- What would understanding of this mathematical concept look like? How would you know if students have "gotten it?"
- Why did allowing students to create their own study questions cause a problem for you?
- Why do you think the expected outcomes of this unit weren't communicated to parents?

## Pocket Guide to Clarifying and Probing Questions for Consultancy Protocol

- What was your intention when you assigned students to oversee the group activity in this assignment?
- What evidence do you have from this student's work that her ability to reach substantiated conclusions has improved?
- How might your assumptions about the reasons why parents aren't involved have influenced what you have tried so far?
- How do you think your expectations for students might have influenced their work on this project?
- What do you think would happen if you restated your professional goals as questions?
- What other approaches have you considered for communicating with parents about their children's progress?