Being Consultative
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Introduction

In a separate article, we have described Ram, a remarkable leader who displays tremendous executive presence. Like Executive Presence, another development need which keeps coming up frequently when we meet Chief Learning Officers in different organizations is **Being Consultative**. What exactly is **Being Consultative**? And how do we develop this competency? In this article, we examine one more outstanding leader Meera who leads from the front when it comes to being consultative.

A consultative leader in action

Meera is a delivery leader in a leading Indian IT Services company but because of her talents and skills, she has grown in stature over the years. Not surprisingly, Meera finds herself being invited to lead many client meetings. She has an uncanny ability to make a great impact on clients and she seems to do this consistently and effortlessly.

To take an example, Meera might be with a manufacturing client who is having a major problem with order fulfillment. Meera will resist the natural temptation of a techie to recommend a new IT platform to replace the current one! She might not even ask: "By how much do you want to reduce the order fulfillment time?" Instead, Meera will start with a fairly open ended question like: "What kind of challenges are you currently facing when it comes to order fulfillment?"

As the client starts speaking, Meera will be all attention. She will paraphrase some of the statements made by the client and also ask some additional questions to get more information: "What are the steps involved in order fulfillment? How do your customers typically place orders? How do your sales people process these orders? On a typical day, what is the value of the orders you handle?"

From time to time, Meera will clarify with the client whether she has understood the situation correctly: "Are we saying that same day order fulfillment is the norm in the industry and your main competitors are doing this quite successfully?"

As the discussion proceeds, Meera might ask more pointed questions: "If you are not able to ship out the order on the same day, what steps do you need to take on the next day to take to ensure that the consignment still reaches the customer on time?"

These pointed questions provide the information Meera needs to prepare a proposal that will make the client happy and also be profitable for Cognizant. Say the client lets it out that 10% of the daily shipments valued at $ 500,000 are being delayed and a cost of 1% has to be incurred on a premium shipment method the next day to meet customer commitments. Then, the additional transportation cost per day is $ 5000. Any solution that will deal with the problem effectively will create a value of more than $ 1.5 million annually. From here on, more than the rate card, the $1.5 million of value created, becomes the anchoring point for the bid.

Having listened carefully and patiently and understood the needs very clearly, Meera will conclude the discussion with the client on a confident and reassuring note: "Thank you for all the information. We realize you are spending an avoidable amount of $ 1.5 million annually because of difficulties in fulfilling orders on the same day. We are happy to inform you that we have supply chain consultants who can develop solutions that will address your problem satisfactorily. Our past experience handling customers in your industry with similar problems indicates that when we implement our solutions, results can be seen in less than a quarter. Moreover, the investments made by the client in process reengineering and IT are recovered in less than 12 months. If you give us the end to end responsibility, we see no reason why we cannot deliver similar benefits for you as well."

This confident assertion made by Meera comes from her subject matter expertise accumulated over 18 years of experience handling customers in the retail and manufacturing verticals. Meera, though she is not an MBA, has a pretty good

understanding of the financial implications of a faulty order fulfillment system. That is because she goes to lunch regularly with the highly knowledgeable consultants in her practice to keep herself educated on the domain side of her delivery work.

Meera does not spend all her time with clients. Indeed, more than 75% of her time is spent on project management. She realizes that her delivery role too demands a consultative style of leadership. She is well aware that she is sandwiched between different stakeholders and has substantially more responsibility for the outcome than authority. Also, the whole team has to pull together to meet all the profitability targets. So Meera reaches out to team members and encourages an upward flow of information. She believes in a participative form of leadership that encourages all the people in the team to contribute ideas and be involved in decision making.

The building blocks

Now that we have seen a consultative leader in action, it is time to understand the building blocks of being consultative.

On the client facing side, being consultative involves the following:

- The art of effective questioning, listening and probing of clients to understand their problems, challenges, goals and objectives.

- The ability to move the discussion away from the technology and the price to the solution and the value it can bring to the table.

- Providing customized, not generic solutions.

- Articulating deep insights, not common knowledge.

- Selling the idea that IT is not a cost but an investment, with the payoff of a call option, i.e. for a small investment, major business benefits can be generated.

- Making the sale and implementation of the product or service a seamless, integral part of the client's ongoing business operations.

While managing delivery, being consultative involves the following:

- Reaching out to the team and encouraging an upward flow of information, concerns and ideas.

- Arriving at the best course of action through collective knowledge-sharing.

- Generating the potential options and discussing the benefits and drawbacks of each option, not rushing into a decision.

- Making logical recommendations but allowing the project stakeholders to make the decision as appropriate.

- An empathetic approach that starts with an inherent desire to listen to others in the team first, rather than give them instructions.