

Critical issue? Critical assistance...

Many consulting exercises within higher education are “project-based” or centred on a specific, timebound scheme of work. This involves consultants in familiar actions such as investigation, research, the development of recommendations and reporting back to clients. There is, however, an increasing trend for on-going or periodic retained consulting or “critical assistance”.

This form of consultancy allows individuals or organisations to call on specialists to support, assist (or challenge) processes or activities (such as marketing, management, planning or strategy development) and to provide objective, decisive or culturally sensitive approaches to key issues that are appropriate to the organisation's context.

Critical assistance can vary widely and is as diverse as the challenges it seeks to address for clients. The common denominator, though, is centred on assistance towards real progress in tackling difficult, sensitive or thorny issues and helping organisations to more effectively manage or address their challenges in a positive and productive way.

FROM TROUBLE-SHOOTER TO ADVISER...

For clients, consultants engaged in critical assistance fulfil many roles, from trouble-shooter to change catalyst, decision-maker to “political” adviser. The consulting process is based around the need an organisation (or a key member of the senior management team) has for objective opinion or specialist expertise. This can take the form of help with on-going processes such as the development of plans, organisational re-structures or strategies.

The consultant will work with the staff to:

- Provide an objective overview.
- Test theories or assumptions.
- Stimulate lateral or “outside the box” thinking about new issues.
- “Reality-check” plans to ensure that they can be taken through to fulfilment or implementation.

APPROACHES

Approaches vary and consultants match their working style and relationship with staff to meet the sub-context of the key issues. For example, while the issue itself may be centred on developing a new mission statement of corporate vision, the underlying challenge for the senior team may be how to ensure that they gain complete staff ownership for such developments.

Similarly, critical assistance to support decisionmaking about approaches to new markets may generate a need to address staff attitudes. In this way, consultants need to work within a number of frameworks, **for example:**

- As providers of clear-cut advice and expertise.
- As challenge agents, testing organisational traditions or bias and accepted opinion.
- As decision facilitators: helping organisations to assess options and make real progress.
- As politically aware advisers: sensitive to internal politics yet pragmatic about planning in such contexts.

WHAT?

Stamp Consulting has provided critical assistance to a wide range of organisations and key staff within and beyond higher education.

Challenges addressed have included:

- On-site crisis management for negative media relations.
- One-to-one advice for senior officers.

- The management of corporate vision development projects, developing staff ownership for a new corporate structure.
- Assessing the implications for organisational change when adopting a new brand.
- Challenging traditional approaches to planning activity.
- Advising on the development of new crossuniversity systems geared to the production of coherent corporate strategy.

WHERE AND WHEN?

Critical assistance can be provided on a regular, pre-arranged basis, for example between two and fifteen days per month (either on-site for meetings or off-site for strategic support to specific projects, as required). Alternatively, support can be provided on an ad hoc or call-off basis, when the need arises.

Meetings or input can include:

- Specific one-to-one discussions with the organisation's staff.
- "Brain storm" sessions with the organisation or with key staff.
- Attendance at specific project meetings as required.
- Market updates/competitor activity updates.
- Analyses of emerging sector trends and implications for the organisation.
- Analyses of emerging threats or opportunities.
- Presentations to key meetings or to provide context for specific projects.

OUTCOMES

The outcomes of critical assistance can include:

- Practical, on-site strategic advice in planning and strategic decision making.
- Written reports, good practice assessments, presentations, seminars, strategic recommendations or benchmarking exercises.

All critical assistance programmes, whatever their nature or scope, commence with a complementary one-to-one discussion to consider issues and map out needs.

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