

## Management Consultants' Colorful Ways of Looking at Change

An explorative study under Dutch Management Consultants

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## **Abstract**

Questionnaire data collected from 71 management consultants is used to gain insight in their preferences and assumptions regarding organizational change. The main question is: 'how do management consultants think about change and which preference do they have regarding the use of intervention methods?' The research is based on a framework in which five perspectives on change are conceptualized and in which each perspective is divided in thinking and doing and as a whole is associated with a color. These perspectives are: yellow print thinking which is based on processes of power, coalition formation and coercion, blue print thinking is synonym with planned and programmed change, red print thinking concerns Human Resource Management, green print thinking lines up with organizational learning, and white print thinking stands for emergent processes of self steering, chaos and sense making. The results suggest that the method used produces useful insight in consultant's attitudes and preferences.

**Keywords:** organizational change; management consultants; change orientations

## **Introduction**

The everyday work of individual management consultants is not merely about implementing ready-made methods and technologies. It has been argued that consultancy work is an ongoing effort of convincing the client on one's usefulness and contribution (Clark and Salaman, 1996; Sturdy, 1997; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas and Davies, 2004). In this regard social skills are of the uttermost importance and personal character and personal preferences seems to be an integral part of a consultant's professional competence (Legge, 2002). In spite of this, Tichy (1974:164) believes that the consultant's approaches on realizing change are based on implicit ideas rather than a set of clearly

formulated principles. What are the foundations of the consultant's success in legitimating their actions, what is the rhetorical space of possible arguments available to them in legitimating their activities, and what is the role of their own preferences in this? Answering these questions requires knowledge of these implicit ideas, so a questionnaire was set out under management consultants to discover their implicit ideas about what works in their opinion, which intervention style they prefer and the intervention methods they most often use.

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In most management consultant books, see for example Block (2000) and De Caluwé & Vermaak (2003), the prevailing opinion is that a management consultant acts through one's own preferences and tends towards a congruence in one's personal preference and one's way of working. The few scientific publications on this subject seem to concentrate on the question to what extent a management consultant is influenced in one's way of working by one's own personal preference or by requirements from the situation or context (Tichy and Hornstein, 1972; Tichy 1974; Werr, Stjernberg & Docherty, 1997). Based on an interview study in five large management consulting companies Werr, Stjernberg & Docherty (1997:288) conclude that the personal preferences of management consultants define the intervention methods that they apply. This seems contradictory to what is stated by Beer and Walton (1987:363) who suggest a more contingency approach in which the methods of management consultants depend upon a variety of situational factors like the type of change problem and the possibilities within a client organization. This stand is also supported by empirical evidence. Based on a sample of 91 management consultants, Tichy (1974) concludes that there are several inconsistencies between personal preferences in the thinking and doing (acting) of management consultants in change processes. One of the explanations for his findings is that management consultants are not self-conscious about their personal preferences. Moreover, Tichy suggests that change agents are probably not aware of any

incongruence on either the value or cognitive dimensions and that one of the factors that allow incongruence to persist, is undoubtedly ignorance itself.

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Regarding the main question we first describe the five perspectives on change as conceptualized by De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003). Then we will present a conceptual research model and operationalize some assumptions derived from the original theory. Then we will describe the applied method. The article concludes with a discussion based on the most remarkable research findings and some explanations.

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### **Five perspectives on realizing change**

The data is analyzed and organized based on the five perspectives on realizing change as conceptualized by De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003).

*Change from a power point of view: the color yellow.* De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) connect the yellow color with the symbolic of power. This color relates to organizational change processes, in which interests, conflicts and power play an important role. This way of looking at realizing change assumes that people will change when you take into account their (own) interest or when you can compel them to accept certain ideas (Pettigrew, 1975:205). It resembles the power-coercive strategy of Chin and Benne (1976:39) and it is often found in change processes where different persons or parties are involved (De Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003). De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) describe the yellow perspective on change as a negotiation exercise aimed at achieving feasible solutions based on win-win and consensus. Examples of yellow interventions are confrontation meetings, strategic alliances and inter-group conflict resolution (Cummings & Worley, 2004).

*Change from a blueprint point of view: the color blue.* De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) assign the color blue to change processes in which there is a clear blue-print approach and a coherent detailed plan to implement it. It refers to change processes that are based on rational

design followed by implementation of change. One of the main assumptions in this perspective is that people or things will change, if a clearly specified result is laid down beforehand. All steps are planned down to the last detail and the specified result as well as the path to be taken is kept well under control. This kind of thinking about change resembles Chin and Benne's (1976: 24) empirical-rational strategy and is based on the assumption that people are rational creatures. De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) describe the perspective on change as managing, planning and controlling the process towards a clear result. A blue way of changing organizations is aimed at the realization of the one and only best solution. Some examples of blue interventions are Business Process Redesign; Total Quality Management, project management and auditing (Cummings & Worley, 2004).

*Change from a HRM point of view: the color red.* De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) connect the color red with the human blood and use this label for change processes in which the human being is seduced and change is made attractive. Change from this perspective stimulates and motivates people for change, and makes change attractive to them. It is assumed that people will do something or change if they get something in return (the "Barter" principle). This is similar to what Zaltman and Duncan call the Barter strategy (1997). Red examples of interventions are competency management; culture change; use of HRM instruments; fit between the individual and the organization; social activities (Cummings & Worley, 2004).

*Change from a learning point of view: the color green.* De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) use the color green for change processes in which the development of people and their learning abilities are central. The color green symbolizes the notion of natural and continuous growth. In this way of looking at realizing change, the main assumption is that people change when they learn. This way of thinking is similar to what Chin and Benne (1976:31) describe as the normative-re-educative strategies, aimed at unlearning certain behaviors and

experimenting with new behaviors. When you organize and orchestrate learning on a collective level organizations as a whole will learn (Hendry, 1998). De Caluwé and Vermaak suggest that the green perspective on change consists of giving feedback, facilitating learning and the creation of a safe environment in which people have the opportunity to experiment with new behavior. Examples of green interventions are gaming, coaching and action learning (Cummings & Worley, 2004).

*Change from a self organization point of view: the color white.* De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) connect the white color with open space, in which people can bring in their own wishes and desires and can create processes of self organization. Change is seen as a perpetual mobile and as an autonomous self-driving that comes from people's own energy and sense making. It refers to 'emergent' processes (Orlikowski in Weick, 2000), in which certain patterns are interpreted in a different way or in which different labels and realities are created (Weick and Quinn, 1999:380). Different actors exchange meanings and give sense by ways of direct participation, common ground and dialogue (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, in progress). According to De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) a white perspective on change is based on removing blocks, close observing, giving meaning to what is happening, allowing external uncertainty and relying on internal certainty. Examples of white interventions are self-steering processes, search conferences, open space and Appreciative Inquiry (Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995).

### **Conceptual framework and some assumptions**

The five perspectives of De Caluwe and Vermaak are represented in each of the three variables illustrated in figure 1.

[here figure 1]

The thinking and doing of the management consultant is operationalized in this study by means of three variables: vision, style and intervention. Vision represents the thinking, and style (behavior) and interventions (method) both represent the doing. The conceptual framework allows us to identify preferences in the thinking and doing of a management consultant: what is the dominant vision, what is the dominant style of intervening and which intervention is most often used. Besides researching the five perspectives we tested some assumptions that were originally conceptualized by De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003).

The first assumption in the original model is the *dominance of one perspective*. Because of the fact that the starting point of each of the perspectives is so different, De Caluwé and Vermaak assume that management consultants will “have a combination of perspectives, but that one perspective will be dominant” (De Caluwé and Vermaak, 2003:60). The authors do not operationalize this assumption. For this study we operationalized perspective-dominance as follows: if 25% of the total score is represented by one perspective, this refers to perspective-dominance. We used this figure in the case of scores on five perspectives. If a person scores only on four perspectives, we used a 30% limit. This definition leaves the possibility that several dominant perspectives exist in one person and can be combined.

The second assumption, which is tested in this research is *perspective-congruence*. A management consultant seems to gain credibility if his way of thinking and doing are congruent. De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003:123) assume that “effective strategies must be based on the dominance of one perspective: the basic perspective”. Although they say that there can be a difference between thinking and doing as a management consultant, they assume that this is not desirable and that the difference must be as small as possible. For this study we operationalized this as follows: there is congruence in perspective, when a

management consultant scores highest on the same perspective for the three variables: vision, style and intervention.

The third and last assumption is the use of *combinations of the various perspectives*. De Caluwé and Vermaak (2003:272) assume that combinations of perspectives are possible and that consultants will have 1 or 2 dominant perspectives. But they also say: “a random mix is a certain prediction of failure” (2003:60). We expect that some combinations will occur more often than others, because of the conflicting starting points.

## **Method**

The participants in this study all work for management consultancy firms with clients in both profit and non-profit sector. The questionnaire is distributed amongst 135 management consultants in the period between September 2001 and March 2002. The majority is approached by mail. The selection of the people was done through Internet: from 7 different firms (more and less known and different sizes) individuals were chosen in a random way. Besides that, the questionnaire is distributed amongst two groups of consultants who participated in the Post Doctoral Course Management Consultancy of the Free University in Amsterdam. In total 71 consultants participated (69% man and 31% woman), with an average age of 38 years and an average experience as consultant of 9 years. 69% of them worked for a consultancy firm with more than 20 consultants, 22,5% for a firm with between five and twenty consultants and 8.5% for a firm with less than five consultants. The response percentage is 53%.

In the questionnaire some questions were asked about background data, like gender, age, amount of experience as a consultant and size of the firm. Following, 35 methods of intervention were mentioned. The respondents were asked to report which of these interventions they normally used. After this 34 propositions were listed. The respondents were asked to relate each of these to their own way of thinking about change. The answer possibilities ranged from 1 (fully disagree) to 4 (fully agree). Finally they were asked to respond to 20 propositions, in which behavioral and attitudinal aspects were listed. The answer possibilities here also ranged from 1 (fully disagree) to 4 (fully agree).

The distribution of age, gender, experience and size of the firm is in accordance with data from the branch and other research (Karsten, 2001; Bolweg, 2001 en Visscher, 2001). The questionnaire is developed specially for this study and applied here for the first time.

## **Results**

Despite the methodological rule of thumb, that one needs four or five times as much respondents as the amount of variables to get a reliable solution for a factor analysis, we applied a factor analysis here because of the exploratory character of the study. The study is aimed at getting a first impression and we might adjust the questionnaire based on the results. With the help of a principal components analysis we reduced the amount of items and we scored the reliability (cronbach's alpha, see table 1).

[Here table 1]

For vision based on a self-organizing perspective and a style based on the HRM perspective we did not find separate factors. That means that vision and style are both characterized by four colors in the analyses to come. With regard to interventions five factors are found. On this basis we calculated for each variable an average score per perspective.

### **Perspective-dominance**

The respondents relate more positively to the propositions, which represent the learning perspective ( $M=2.92$ ) compared to the other perspectives ( $M<2.48$ ) regarding change vision. With respect to style the power perspective as well as the learning perspective are most popular ( $M=3.06$  and  $M=3.07$ ). The blueprint perspective is most popular in the respondents' interventions ( $M=.41$ ), but is closely followed by the Human Resource Management perspective ( $M=.39$ ). The averages give no reason to assume there is a preference for one specific perspective on the level of this population.

We also looked at the individual results. The application of the 25% or 30% rule gives the following results in table 2.

[here table 2]

This table shows that 39.4% of the respondents has a dominance of one or more perspectives with regard to vision (thinking). From these 26 respondents, 19 consultants have a dominant vision based on the learning perspective. Style dominance is found for 36.9% (n=24) of the respondents; many of the consultants have a dominant style based on the power perspective (n=10). With respect to interventions, dominance was found amongst 67 respondents (98.5%); only one respondent did not have dominance. From these 67 respondents, 29 have a blueprint dominance in their intervention preferences. If there is a dominance with more perspectives, it is mostly combined with a vision or style based on the power perspective (by 12 consultants).

### **Perspective congruence**

With the help of a one-sided correlation analysis we looked at the congruence in thinking and doing of consultants. Significant positive correlations are found for vision and interventions based on the power perspective ( $r=.22$ ,  $p=.00$ ), vision and style based on the learning perspective ( $r=.43$ ,  $p=.00$ ) and for style and interventions based on the self organizing perspective ( $r=.36$ ,  $p=.00$ ). For the other perspectives we did not find similar correlations. So, it can be concluded that when the thinking and doing of a consultant can be characterized with the power (yellow), learning (green) or self organizing (white) perspective, the chances for perspective congruence are greater. Only one respondent showed congruence in all three variables.

### **Combinations of perspectives**

To get a picture about the combination of perspectives, we used a two-sided correlation analysis for each variable and we looked for coherence between perspectives: which

perspectives are combined often, with regard to vision, style and intervention? The result of this analysis is described in table 3.

[here table 3]

This table tells us, that some are more often combined than others with regard to each variable. The perspectives based on power and blueprint show a coherence with regard to vision ( $r=.32$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and the perspectives based on blueprint and learning for style ( $r=.28$ ,  $p<.02$ ). For intervention the perspectives based on power and blueprint correlate ( $r=.48$ ,  $p<.00$ ), the perspectives based on HRM and self-organizing ( $r=.44$ ,  $p<.00$ ), HRM and learning ( $r=.42$ ,  $p<.00$ ) and learning and self organizing ( $r=.40$ ,  $p<.00$ ). We can conclude that the consultant more often chooses for multi-perspective approaches with regard to interventions than with regard to vision or style.

With a two-sided correlation analysis we found in twelve cases significant correlations ( $p<.05$ ) between multi-perspective combinations. This is reproduced in figure 2.

[here figure 2]

This figure, shows a big gap between the perspectives blueprint (blue) and power (yellow) on the one side and the perspectives HRM (red), learning (green) and self-organizing (white) on the other side. We found a total of twelve significant correlations. Two of them are a positive correlation between the power and blueprint perspective and four positive correlations between the HRM, learning and self-organizing perspectives. We also found five negative correlations that confirms the gap between the power and blueprint perspectives on the one side and HRM, learning and self-organizing perspectives on the other side. Only one positive

correlation between vision based on a blueprint perspective and style based on a learning perspective contradicts this. Based on our sample we conclude that Management Consultants often make combinations between the HRM (red), learning (green) and self organizing (white) perspectives, which is also true for the power (yellow) and blueprint perspective. With respect to our findings we conclude that a combination between those groups is not likely.

## **Discussion**

By looking at the results we find at one hand a preference for change approaches that underline processes of learning (green) and self-organization (white) and at the other hand a preference in using intervention methods that are aimed at planned behavior and control (the blueprint perspective). So there seems incongruence between the variables vision, style and most often used interventions which shows similarity with the results found in Tichy's (1974) sample. Furthermore, the results suggest that a management consultant is not acting according to his personal preference. Following the suggestions of Tichy and as presented in figure 3, it seems plausible that some situational factors play a role in choosing style and method of intervening.

[here figure 3]

Examples of such situational factors are the perspective(s) of the manager who hire a management consultant, the characteristics of the problem and the possible solution (Werr et al, 1997) and values of the dominant organizational culture (Beer, 2001).

Werr et al. (1997) suggest that an intervention method is a framework. Within that framework the way of working strongly depends upon the preference of the manager or management consultant, but also upon the type of change problem and the possibilities for

change in a certain organization. Moreover, the results are based upon self-reports of consultants, not on what they really think and do. However the possibility cannot be denied that the respondents gave socially desirable answers. Another question regards the fact, whether consultants are aware of their own preferences and possible incongruence (Tichy, 1974).

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Another note that we would like to make, concerns the dichotomous picture that is reflected in figure 2. It gives the impression that the thinking and doing of the respondents can largely be divided in two perspectives: on the one hand a change perspective, from which rational, content-oriented and expert-oriented considerations are made (combination of the blueprint and power perspective) and on the other hand an individual or group perspective from which social, cultural and process considerations are made (a combination of the HRM, learning and self-organizing perspectives). These results suggest that there are two groups of consultants with very different (and possible opposite) perspectives (thinking and doing).

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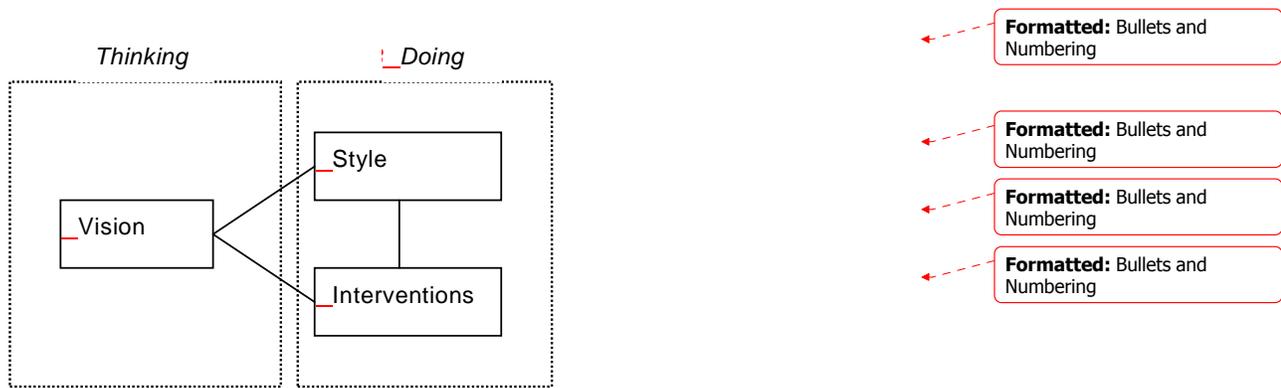


Figure 1 *Conceptual framework for organizing management consultant data*

Table 1 *Number of items and reliability score for each perspective per variable*

Perspectives	Vision		Style		Intervention	
	Number of items	Cronbach $\alpha$	Number of items	Cronbach $\alpha$	Number of items	Cronbach $\alpha$
Yellow	4*	0.6	2	0.4	2	0.6
Blue	5	0.6	2	0.5	5	0.6
Red	3	0.5	/	/	5*	0.7
Green	5	0.6	3	0.5	2*	0.7
White	/	/	3	0.6	3	0.6

\* After removal of an item (57, 11.2 en 10.6)

Table 2 *Number of respondents showing perspective dominance*

	None	One colordominance	Several colordominances
Vision*	41 (62.1 %)	25 (37.9 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Style**	42 (64.6 %)	23 (35.4 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Intervention***	1 (1.5 %)	13 (19.1 %)	54 (79.4 %)

\* 5 records (7.0 %); \*\* 6 records (8.5 %) ; \*\*\* 3 records (4.2 %) are incomplete and excluded

Table 3 Regression coefficients between perspectives for each variable

	<b>Yellow</b>	<b>Blue</b>	<b>Red</b>	<b>Green</b>
<b>Vision</b>				
Yellow	/	.31*	.11	-.19
Blue	/	/	.21	-.00
Red	/	/	/	-.02
<b>Style</b>				
White	-.41	.01	/	.08
Yellow	/	.05	/	.073
Blue	/	/	/	.28*
<b>Intervention</b>				
White	-.17	-.07	.44**	.40**
Yellow	/	.48**	.02	-.10
Blue	/	/	-.01	-.08
Red	/	/	/	.42**

\*\* Correlation significant at .01 level (2-way)

\* Correlation significant at .05 level (2-way)

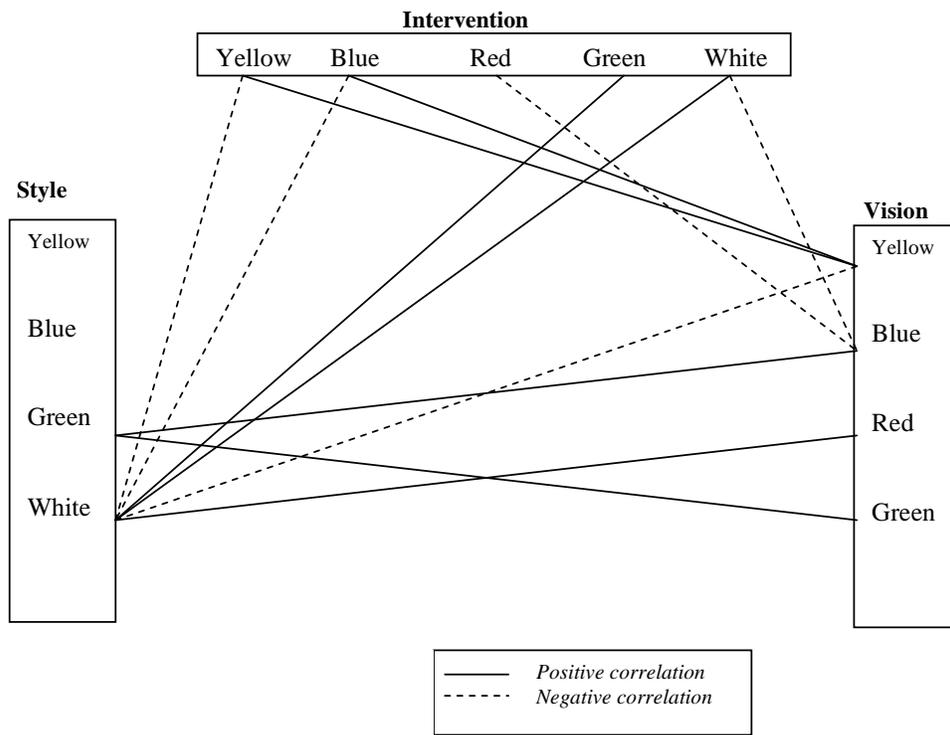
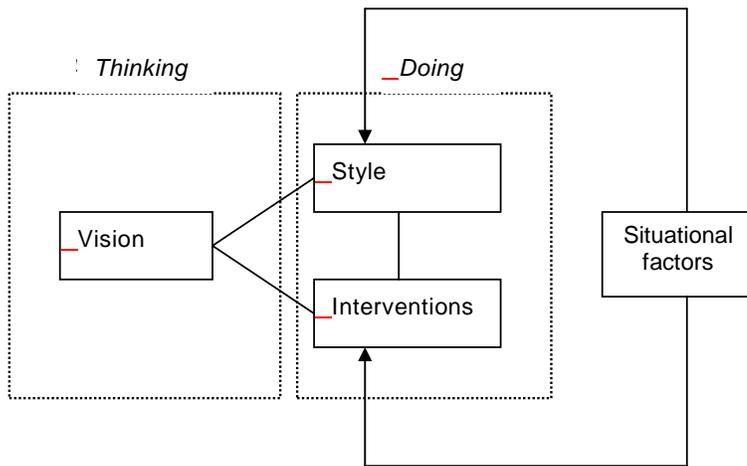


Figure 2 Overview of significant correlations between the variables



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Figure 3 *New conceptual framework*