[[RE FC3 icon p 120]]

The Bonner Case

In Chapters 1 through 6 in the book, we covered some of the essentials of consulting skills: the phases of consulting, the steps in the contracting process and its recycling nature, plus the objective of maintaining a 50/50 balance in taking responsibility for the consulting action. What follows is a case study of a small consulting project. As you read through it, try and identify how Dave, the consultant, and Alan, the client, move through the entry, contracting, data collection, feedback, and decision-to-proceed phases of consulting. Also pay attention to the ceaseless negotiation over Dave's and Alan's roles.

THE BONNER CASE

By Mike Hill

Background Data: The Bonner case concerns a large manufacturing organization. It deals with the efforts of David Bell, an internal staff person, in responding to a request for assistance from Alan Kane, the manager of the company's engineering laboratory. Alan is one of six engineering managers who report to Tom Bonner, vice president for engineering.

The telephone rang. It was Alan Kane. The conversation went something like this.

Alan: I've got a problem, Dave. I think you can help me with this one.

Dave: What happened, Alan? Is Bonner boiling over again?

Alan: Something like that. I've just come from Bonner's staff meeting. He is very unhappy about our quarterly staff meetings.

Bonner holds weekly meetings with his staff (six unit managers who report to him). Every three months, he also holds an expanded staff meeting which is attended by all engineering management down to the first-line supervisors (about forty people). He has been using this expanded staff meeting to present general information concerning the company's financial health: the current business picture, new business plans, status of major programs, etc.

Dave: What's the matter with them?

Alan: Bonner feels they are dull and unproductive. He feels that first-line supervisors have information needs that are not being met and that the current meeting format is off target.

Dave: Do you agree?

Alan: Yes, they are on the dull side. I think what started this flap was that at the last meeting Bonner scheduled some time for a question-and-answer period. The staff has discussed a number of things that are bugging people, such as arbitrary cuts in labor estimates that cause cost overruns, differences in pay levels between this and other divisions, rumors about impending layoffs, and so on. Bonner feels they may have a lot of misinformation on these subjects, and he felt a question-and-answer period would help to straighten things out. Well, a few questions were asked—nothing of any significance—then there was an awkward silence. Bonner is unhappy about this. He wants something done.

Dave: Did he tell you what he wanted?

Alan: Not exactly. We discussed several ideas. None were acceptable. We ran out of time so it ended with my getting the job to present a proposal at the next meeting.

Dave: Why you?

Alan: Bonner knows I've been working with you to revise my staff meeting format. He questioned me about what we have done. To make a long story short, I got the job—I'm now a meeting expert.

Dave: Your staff meeting and the quarterly meeting are not the same thing at all.

Alan: Right. That's why I want to get you on this—today. Dave, I've given you all the information I have. I want you to put together a proposal on this for me. I'm really bogged down right now, but I can see you Wednesday.

Dave: Hold it, Alan. I can't write a proposal in the dark. I'll need some data. Look, I don't think we can work this on the phone. Why don't I come over and we'll talk.

Alan: Dave, I'm really tied up for time. I've told you all I know. This will be an easy one for you.

Dave: Alan, if this were easy, you wouldn't have called me. I'll be glad to help, but we need to talk.

Alan: OK. If you insist. Come over after lunch.

Dave: How about 4:30? I'll need at least an hour—maybe more—with no phone calls, side meetings, or other interruptions. OK?

Alan: OK. See you at 4:30.

Dave met with Alan as agreed. He began by summarizing their telephone conversation. Alan has a flip chart in his office, so at the end of Dave's brief summary, he walked up to the flip chart and wrote:

OBJECTIVE: Create a meeting format that will speak to the information needs of our first-line supervisors.

Dave: This is a one sentence summary of what I heard, right?

Alan: Right. That's about it.

Dave: OK. Let's brainstorm some ways to do this.

As they talked, Dave listed each item on the flip chart. They quickly came up with a dozen ideas. Then they went back over each item to test for feasibility. Time was the toughest factor to deal with. The quarterly staff meeting was two weeks off, leaving them little time for any data gathering from the first-line supervisors. One item, however, had possibilities. Dave underlined it on the flip chart: "Ask first-line supervisors for agenda items that Bonner would speak to."

Dave: With the time constraints we have, this is the only one we can work with. Do you agree?

Alan: Yes. I think we can work with it. I like the logic. It's simple: If you want to speak to their information needs, a good place to start is to ask them what their information needs are. We learned something like this working with my staff—remember?

Dave and Alan discussed the pros and cons awhile and decided they would give this idea a try for several reasons.

1.It would ensure that they would be speaking to the information needs of the first-line supervisors (Bonner's criterion).

2.It would provide a good test for Bonner's notion that "they have information needs we are not dealing with."
3.It wouldn't eat up a lot of the supervisors' time.
4.It could be done in the time available.

Dave: OK. This is a start. But I think we should consider some of the conditions Bonner and the staff will have to accept to give this approach a chance.

Alan: Meaning what?

Dave: Meaning we better spell out some ground rules. For example, answering questions takes time. Bonner will have to agree to spend the time required.

Alan and Dave talked along these lines awhile. As they talked, Dave made notes on a flip chart. Their final list was as follows:

1.Staff must agree to spend time required.
2.There may be some tough questions. Bonner would have to agree to provide straightforward answers.
3.There would be no screening, editing, or elimination of any question submitted.
4.Each manager would have to agree to gather agenda items from his or her own people and turn them into Bonner one week before the meeting. This would have to be a firm deadline.

At this point, they had been talking for about an hour and Alan suggested they call it a day.

Alan: OK, Dave. I think we have it. There is enough here for you to write a proposal.

Dave: Alan, we have a good start, but we're not finished. We don't have time to go back and forth on this. More important, for me, is that this has to be your proposal—not mine.

Alan: Look, Dave, you can take it from here. Write it up just the way we discussed it. We don't have to go back and forth with this. You can write it up and present it to the staff.

Dave: Hold it. I thought I was working with you on this. If I present it, that puts me in the middle—it's a "can't win" position for me. I'll go to the staff meeting with you, if you like, but I think it would be a mistake for me to take the lead on this.

Alan: You're making a mountain out of a molehill.

Dave: Maybe so, but my experience with Bonner tells me to be cautious. Look, we have an outline for a proposal. Let's do it now.

Alan: We don't have a proposal. All we have is an outline.

Dave: Right. I suggest you present it just as we developed it so you get some staff involvement.

Alan: Won't that take a lot of time?

Dave: The discussion will take a little time. But if this is as important as Bonner says it is, he'll have to agree to spend some time with it. If he can't spend the time, let's put it off until he has the time.

Alan: You're playing with fire! Bonner expects a proposal—in writing.

Dave: We have a proposal. Let's write it down right now.

Alan: OK. Let's get on with it.

They wrote down their five-point proposal.

1.A general statement
2.Objectives (what they were trying to do)
3.Procedures (how they proposed to do it)

4.Ground rules (conditions that need to be understood and accepted)
5.Follow-up (how they would check on results)

They agreed that Alan would present each of the items listed. They would be presented as points of departure for staff discussion, for a decision to be made after the discussion.

Bonner's staff meeting started on schedule. After the normal staff meeting agenda was completed, Alan started his presentation.

Alan: At the last meeting, I was asked to come up with a new format for our quarterly staff meeting. I've asked Dave to help me with this and we have a proposal for your consideration. It may be best to start with a statement of the goal we used to guide our thinking.

Alan distributed the first sheet.

OBJECTIVE: Create a meeting format that will speak to the information needs of our first-line supervisors.

Alan: This is what I heard at our last meeting. We assumed that some time would be used to present general program information as in past meetings—say, forty-five minutes for this—and the remainder of the meeting—one hour or more—would be used in a question-and-answer session.

Jim: I'm not convinced we need a new format. Dave, what evidence do you have that a question-and-answer session is needed?

Dave: I have no evidence.

Jim: Then why are you proposing this?

Dave: There may be some misunderstanding about my role in this project. I was asked to help Alan develop a new meeting format using this objective as one the staff had agreed on. If this is not so, we need to find out before we go on. Jim, I don't know if you need a new format. I thought you had already decided this.

Bonner: No. That would take too long. Jim, I don't have any hard data on this. What I have is a gut feeling based on some information discussions. I want to try this as a test. I thought I heard agreement on this at our last meeting.

Several staff members nodded in agreement.

Dave: It is important, to me, that I not be seen as pushing for a change. I am not. I think it would be out of line for me to do so. I am here to answer any questions about the ideas Alan and I put together, which were based on this objective as a given. I need to hear a clear signal on this from all of you. Is this your objective?

Staff: Agreed.

Alan: OK. Using this statement as our goal, we developed a procedure to get at questions of concern to the first-line supervisors.

Alan distributed the second sheet.

PROCEDURE

1.Inform first-line supervisors that the next meeting will be in two parts:
   a. General program and new business data, and
   b. A question-and-answer session.
2.Agenda for the question-and-answer session will consist of questions submitted by the first-line supervisors.
3.No restriction on type of question.
4.Questions submitted will not be edited and none deleted. They will be placed on the agenda as submitted.
5.Bonner will speak to all questions submitted.

Alan: Concerning the first and second items, I think we should tell it like it is: Bonner feels they have questions that need discussion. The staff agrees. We want to provide an opportunity for two-way discussion on questions of concern to them.

Concerning the remaining items, are there any questions?

Jim: Item 4 could cause all kinds of problems. If each person asked only two questions, this could add up to a hundred questions. Dave, did you think of that?

Dave: Yes. We discussed it at length. The fact is discussion takes time. There is no way around it. We need to be clear on this. Unless the staff is prepared to spend the time needed, I would recommend against a question-and-answer format.

Jim: Dave, how much time do you think it might take?

Dave: I don't know.

Jim: What would you do if the number of questions added up to a three-hour session?

Dave: I would hand the problem back to the first-line supervisors. I would tell them, "After looking over your questions, we have estimated a three-hour session. We are prepared to stay if you are." If they agree, there is no problem. If they think this is too long, fine—I'd ask them what they want us to do. I think they should be told this is their session and that they will have to accept some responsibility for it.

Bonner: I don't think we'll get three or four hours of questions. If we do, we can ask them to rank order the questions. We can then speak to as many as we can in an hour or so and schedule another meeting to deal with the remaining questions. Jim, I know there are some unknowns here, but I want to give this a try.

Alan: We considered the time-consuming aspects of this. I think there will be some closely related questions and some duplications. I think the time needed will be manageable.

Jim: I think we should screen the questions for duplications.

Alan: We discussed screening and rejected it because of the possible bad impression. Screening will tell them, in effect, we want to answer your questions but we'll decide which questions to deal with. I don't think this is the impression we want to make.

Jim: I agree. I didn't mean to eliminate any questions. I meant to group related questions and list them as submitted.

Alan: Are you volunteering to do the grouping?

Jim: I will if you will.

Alan: OK. Jim and I will review the questions and group related questions.

Dave: No eliminations? No rewording?

Alan: Right. No eliminations. No changes.

Dave: Do you all agree with this?

Staff: Agreed.

Bonner: OK. Let's get on with it. I'll expect each of you to get your questions into Jane by Friday. Jane will call Jim and Alan when they are all in and they can do the grouping.

Alan: I have one more item. We discussed doing a follow-up check to get their reactions. We need to know if they see this as a useful exercise.

Bonner: Dave, what's a fast way to do this?

Dave: I can help Jim and Alan prepare a brief questionnaire they could complete at the end of the meeting.

Bonner: Do you all agree with that?

Staff: Agreed.

Bonner: OK. Do it. I'll see you on Friday.

***

A Look into the Bonner Case

The Bonner Case takes us through a brief consulting assignment. There are some important events in it that are worth highlighting as a review of the 50/50 consulting process.

Important elements of the entry phase have been taken care of before the case begins. Dave and Alan already have a good working relationship and they have recent experience working in a collaborative mode. Nevertheless, Alan has expectations that Dave does not want to fulfill, and getting clarity around Alan's expectations becomes the first order of business for Dave. Entry in this case begins with Alan's statement: "I've got a problem, Dave. I think you can help me with this one."

The first part of the dialogue is a discussion of the "presenting" problem—dull, unproductive staff meetings. In the exchange that follows, Dave tries to get at Alan's perception of the problem—Who is involved?, Who will be the client?, and What kind of help is needed. This constitutes the initial data collection. In this case, it took five minutes. In other cases, it may take six months before the consultant can get a clear picture of what's going on.

When Dave asks for a meeting with Alan, he has, in effect, made a decision to accept the task and he has identified Alan as the client. This "identifying the client" is a critical issue in the entry phase. The consultant needs to clarify and get agreement on mutual expectations before any work is done. As is almost always the case, Dave's identification of Alan as the client is tentative. This issue comes up again later in the dialogue, as we shall see.

Contracting begins when Alan says, "Dave, I've given you all the information I have. I want you to put together a proposal on this for me. I'm really bogged down right now, but I can see you Wednesday." In this statement, Alan expresses a role expectation for Dave and suggests a deadline for meeting that expectation. This is a crucial decision point for Dave. If he accepts the task defined by Alan, he has in effect agreed to act as a pair-of-hands. Once this kind of contract is made, it's almost impossible to change.

Dave responds with his own conception of his role and how he wants to work with Alan. He states, clearly, that he doesn't want to write the proposal alone, that he doesn't have enough data, that he doesn't want to work further on the telephone, and that he doesn't want to wait until Wednesday before taking the next step.

There is nothing in Dave's seemingly incessant demands that communicates he doesn't want to work on the project, that he doesn't care about Alan, or that he isn't open to influence. These are the fantasies that most of us have when we try to avoid being used as a pair-of-hands and take an assertive stance about our role. Dave gets agreement to work with Alan on Alan's problem. The distinction is significant. The word contract hasn't been used but, clearly, a contract has been made.

With the entry and contracting out of the way and initial data collection completed, they move on to the feedback stage, which in this case is expressed in one sentence: "Objective: Meeting format that will speak to the information needs of our first-line supervisors." This is a more operational statement of the presenting problem (unproductive staff meetings).

The discussion then turns to planning the main event. A key part of this planning is to spell out the minimum conditions for success, in effect, outlining the contract that must be made with Bonner and the staff.

As they move through this phase, Dave is trying to do two things: (1) help Alan solve the immediate problem, and (2) provide his help in such a way that Alan (and maybe Bonner and his staff) can learn something about how to handle problems like this in the future.

What is being taught about solving this kind of problem? First, that when trying to manage the communication process in a large organization, at least 50 percent of the action must be in the hands of the people in the lower-power positions. Second, that some kind of special structure needs to be designed so that concerns can get expressed freely. For people in lower-power positions to assert themselves, they need visible signs that their stating their needs—especially those that question management actions—will not be punished, but rather will be rewarded.

Back to the case. After they agree on an action plan, Dave and Alan once again find themselves contracting over their roles. Alan wants Dave to present the proposal to the staff. Dave objects: "If I present it, that puts me in the middle—it's 'can't win' position for me." Dave insists that Alan is the client, that he (Dave) has no contract with Bonner or the staff.

They also disagree over the stance to be taken with Bonner. Can they collaborate with him and engage in joint planning with the staff, or do they present Bonner with "completed staff work?" The result is a compromise: Dave gets the proposal in writing and Alan agrees to present it as a point of departure for discussion and decision, not as a final proposal.

In the meeting with Bonner, the problem of "who is the client" comes up again. So, the cycle of contracting, data collection, and planning begins again. A critical incident occurs when Jim says, "I'm not convinced we need a new format. Dave, what evidence do you have that a question-and-answer session is needed?" The issue is one of getting clarity on who is taking responsibility for the change.

Instead of trying to persuade or convince the staff, Dave puts the responsibility back on Bonner, where it belongs, since he started the whole thing in the first place. "If this is not so, now is the time to find out"—Dave states his contract with Alan and asks for confirmation. With this settled (temporarily, as always), the discussion proceeds on a procedural level. When Jim agrees to participate in the grouping of the questions, this is a clear signal that the goal of collaboration has been accomplished.

It is clear that the original problem of dull staff meetings has been redefined as a problem of trust and honest dialogue between Bonner and his staff and between the managers and the supervisors. Jim's persistent questions reflect the resistance of the mangers to changing the conversation with the supervisors. Although Jim was the outspoken one, he was also expressing the doubts of the others. It is important to realize that Jim's vocal objections are condoned by the quietness of the others. This keeps us from branding Jim as the problem.

The meeting moved on as Jim yielded, but the issue is not gone. At some point Dave will have to raise the deeper question of whether Bonner and the staff want a workplace where questions and doubts are expressed. In the narrowness of the presenting problem, the larger issue can always be found. Part of the consultant's job is to understand this and to help the client see the deeper question and make a choice.