

# Management Consulting's Black Holes – a Question of Time and Space

by  
Dr Cyril Kirwan

*Regular debates within the world of theoretical physics have maintained awareness of the phenomenon of 'black holes', those spaces into which much energy disappears and from which little or none emerges. Those pondering this question need look no further than the 'parallel universe' of management consulting to find answers. Not nearly enough, it would appear, of the vast amount of resources spent on consulting activity results in tangible and meaningful benefits for organisations. Yet there are conditions that can help this situation. Chief amongst them is the ability of the participants (clients) to generate the time and the mental space to 'make it happen'. This article discusses what can help do just that.*

## The Issue

In today's rapidly changing business environment, gaining and sustaining competitive advantage is critical for organisations' success. To that end, billions of pounds, euro and dollars are spent in developing the necessary capabilities through a variety of individual, team and organisational consulting interventions. However, particularly for those types of interventions that require behavioural change, such as leadership development, team development or organisation development, evidence concerning the value organisations derive from what they spend is not particularly encouraging. Estimates range from 10% to 30% of skills and knowledge being fully applied by people in those organisations after the consultants have left. At a broader level, reports suggest that a high proportion of change/transformation programmes fail – a figure of 70% is regularly mentioned. Therefore, facilitating application of learning back on the job, i.e. transfer of learning, should receive more attention.

## What is transfer of learning?

Transfer of learning is discussed in the literature in terms of the generalisation of what is learned (e.g. skills acquired, knowledge gained) from interventions to the job context, as well as maintenance of that learning over time. For example, consultants may work with an organisation to incorporate a new way of formulating strategy. They may facilitate a team in clarifying its goals or improving its processes. Or a particular leader may now have a professional development agenda to implement. Each may involve the consultants 'leaving knowledge behind' to continue the process started and integrate it into the organisation's way of doing business, so 'transfer of learning' becomes important.

Many factors affect the amount of learning transfer that will take place. While a discussion of them is beyond the scope of this article, a variety of influences relating either to the clients affected by the intervention, the design of the intervention itself or the work environment have all demonstrated effects. Of the factors studied, perhaps the one whose importance has been most clearly and consistently demonstrated has been individuals' motivation to transfer that learning. It makes sense. No matter how successful the intervention is (in the eyes of the consultant) unless people want to use what they learned in practice it will be very difficult for this to happen. Nevertheless, research by this author has uncovered what may be the key to translating that motivation into reality. The research highlighted the necessity for two factors in particular to be present – the participants' *motivation to transfer* (not surprisingly) but also their *ability to transfer*. *Motivation to transfer* is about how much effort one is prepared to put into using learned knowledge and skills back at work. *Ability to transfer* is about the extent to which individuals can make the time and 'mental space' in their work to apply that learning.

The two factors work together, with the latter as the means by which the former can be translated into action. In the research, *ability to transfer* was the factor that correlated most strongly and significantly with actual learning transfer. *Motivation to transfer* is easier to generate but harder to maintain, so *ability to transfer* is critical. While it sounds like a personal characteristic (and there is no doubt that certain types of people find it easier than others) evidence also clearly suggests that *ability to transfer* is influenced by the support people receive from a number of sources such as managers, peers and the broader organisation.

### **So, what can consultants do?**

For many consultancy assignments, the consultants' responsibility ends when the intervention is formally finished. However, their departure may be only the beginning of the process to embed new learning into the client organisation's way of doing things. Consultants can enhance their reputation by improving the chances that what they leave behind will last, by acknowledging the need for time and mental space to allow changes to happen. Before they depart, a number of transfer-enhancing practices can be considered, perhaps in the form of short workshops, in order to help generate that necessary time and mental space.

### ***Goal setting and self-management sessions***

There is plenty of evidence out there to suggest that setting clear goals to achieve specific ends makes achievement of those ends a more likely prospect. Self-management (of which goal setting is a component) is concerned with promoting self-directed behaviour on the part of the individual, in order for any new skills learned to survive the transition from the intervention to the job. It is meant to enable individuals to cope with new realities, temporary failures, the need for development of support skills, and organisational support issues. It usually takes place towards the end of the intervention and looks at how stated goals might be achieved, what will get in the way of implementing them, what help will be needed, and so on. Sometimes called 'maintenance of behaviour' activities, short sessions incorporating these at the end of an intervention have been shown to aid learning transfer and thus the effectiveness of the intervention.

### ***Action planning***

Any of the activities just described can be consolidated into an action plan, a statement of what the individual intends to do to enhance the chances of his/her learning translating into real changes in behaviour at work. While action plans can be constructed at any time, and don't even need to be part of an intervention, it is usually such an event (and the reflective time that accompanies it) that starts one thinking along those lines. In any case, experience has shown that the most effective action plans typically follow a thought process that starts with taking some time to think about what has been learned during the intervention. Areas in which success is already being achieved are identified, as well as areas in which improvements might be made. It is generally considered inadvisable to attempt to tackle more than two or three areas, on the basis that making too many plans will more likely result in no plans being carried out successfully. An additional benefit can be gained by discussing the draft action plan with a colleague, ideally someone travelling the same road. The role of that individual can be to 'reality test' the plan for specificity, achievability, etc. Changes to be made to the plan can be noted there and then.

### ***Using a coach or mentor***

Finally, working with coaches (whether internal or external) and mentors is increasingly being seen as an effective way of creating that necessary time and mental space. Ideas can be tested, doubts surfaced, and advice sought regarding the best ways of navigating a changed landscape. Some consultants have coaches on call for this type of support or may recommend using internal support. Coaching is increasingly showing up in the literature as a ‘transfer of learning’ aid, as well as a learning strategy in its own right. Indeed a coaching situation is the very definition of the creation of space for thinking.

### **Conclusion**

Given the evidence presented earlier concerning the return on consultancy investment, organisations can derive much greater benefits from that investment by improving individuals’ ability to transfer – translating their learning into practical and meaningful behavioural change. While many of the factors to be considered are not under the control of consultants, they may be able to enhance the effectiveness of their interventions by helping to create time and mental space for clients to absorb and transfer what they learn. In this way will investment in the capabilities necessary to deliver competitive advantage be realised.

### **About the author**

Dr Cyril Kirwan (CMC-AF) is a highly experienced work and organisational psychologist. Having worked for many years in the airline and financial services sectors, he now designs and delivers interventions in areas such as leadership development, change management and executive coaching for clients in both private and public sectors, in Ireland and abroad. In addition, he undertakes research projects in learning and development (L&D) needs analysis, evaluation of L&D interventions and assessment of learning transfer.