

Case study: What Characterizes a Successful Advisor Visit?

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Abstract: We explore how advisors' relational competence influences inter-subjectivity and farmers' perceptions of farm visits, in a setting where advisors have considerable power. We attended ten advisor visits on dairy farms (two farms per advisor) and interviewed both farmers and advisors. Our findings show that the power relation leaves room for advisors to define their roles widely, ranging from inspector to coach. Advisors differently perceive what their jobs are and when they have done a good job. These differences determine the degree of inter-subjectivity and how satisfied farmers are with visits. Furthermore, advisors' relational and professional competencies are crucial to achieving high inter-subjectivity and satisfied farmers. Tine's advisory service could try to separate the control function from the farm visit to obtain a clear distinction between advisory and control tasks. Another way to leave more power with the farmers is to let them choose advisors themselves. The power relation in our study differs from most consultant–client interactions in the literature.

Key words: advisor, inter-subjectivity, power, relational competence, farmer

Introduction

There is substantial literature on the economic importance of knowledge to organizations (Argote et al. 2003), with much emphasizing the role of using new external knowledge to help create new practices (Haas 2006). Co-production of knowledge and bridging through redundant knowledge, joint working, and personal relations can also be assumed in many cases and are increasing (Sturdy et al. 2009). In agriculture, the advisor role is more essential than ever in providing necessary specialist support to farmers as they struggle to meet the demands of changing technologies of production, legislation, environmental processes, and policy issues (Ingram 2008). The client–consultant interaction is the most important factor for successful consulting projects (Schön 1983). However, we still do not have a good understanding of what consultants and clients do, particularly what they do jointly (Sturdy et al. 2009). With a few exceptions, Engwall and Kipping's (2002: 8) assessment that 'the interaction process between consultants and their clients is still poorly understood' remains valid. The poor understanding mainly arises because researchers seldom have access to consultant-client visits (Messervy 2014), as most consulting firms are unwilling to allow interviews with their clients (Nikolova et al. 2009).

Following Nikolova et al. (2009), we think that focusing on what clients and consultants actually do in various settings within a practice-based approach will further enrich understanding of this critical knowledge exchange relation. However, although the management consultancy literature frequently mentions the central role of consultants in understanding consultancy processes, clients have been largely neglected (Hislop 2002). We cannot understand clients without considering both parties and their relationships (Alvesson et al. 2009).

Farm advisors from the Norwegian dairy cooperative Tine pay farmers one mandatory visit per year. The key advisor is supposed to clarify the farmers' professional needs, such as the need for advisory services from Tine, as well as check the production conditions in the cowshed and the herd recordings. Our research team attended ten such consultant-client meetings on farms and interviewed both the farmers and the advisors. Our aims are to cast light on what happens in such meetings between consultants and clients. This paper explores which factors determine farmers' perceptions of visits from advisors and the inter-subjectivity

in such visits. Our research question is, ‘What determines successful meetings between farmers and advisors?’ The paper is organized as follows. First, we present relevant literature and describe the empirical material and methods used. We then analyze interviews and transcripts from the visits. Finally, we discuss the findings and conclusions.

Literature review and theory

Inter-subjectivity

Inter-subjectivity generally concerns the ability to share in another's lived experience (Stern 2005). The term is used to conceptualize the psychological relationship between people during conversation—for example, for building a shared understanding. Within psychology and psychotherapy, inter-subjectivity refers to an experience community for sharing emotions, intentions, and thoughts (Stern 1985, 2004; Trevarthen 1993). This way of communicating where both parties understand each other is sometimes referred to as a ‘temporarily shared social world’ (Rommetveit 1974, 29). Inter-subjectivity is about shared communication and coordination of participants’ contributions. Shared communication means designing a recursive communicative process that makes participants interested in each other's contributions (Rommetveit, 1989). Understanding the intentions, goals, and emotional states of oneself and others is the primary intersubjective mode (Bateman and Fonagy 2004). Thus, inter-subjectivity is about developing a joint room for collaboration and thus represents the essence of the whole advisory dialogue.

The advisor's self-perspective

The relation between the advisor and client and its quality are fundamental in modern advisory theory (Kvalsund 2015, 42). Both parties are crucial for the outcome of the visit. Factors include the advisors’ competence, qualities as a professional, and ability to enter the relation with clients in a good, confidence-building, and efficient way (Ivey et al. 2012; McLeod 2013; Kvalsund 2015, 43). The challenge for the advisor is understanding and interpreting the relational needs that occur in the helping relation (Kvalsund 2015, 45). It is therefore crucial for the advisors’ relational development to understand themselves, who they are, and how they can observe and reflect upon themselves in different interactions. Thus, relational consciousness and introspection are important advisor characteristics. These concepts include the ability to relate to oneself and to ‘observe’ oneself from the outside. Furthermore, they presuppose that advisors can divide between who they are, who they think they are, and how they portray themselves to others. Of course, advisors differ in this capacity, and we think these differences affect the inter-subjectivity and how satisfied farmers are with visits.

Empathy and therapeutic climate

Empathy is ‘the capacity to share and understand another’s state of mind or emotion’ (Ioannidou and Konstantikaki, 2008). Empathy means to recognize others’ feelings and the causes of those feelings, and to be able to participate in the emotional experience of an individual without becoming part of it (Keen 2007). According to Kierkegaard (1859), empathy is pivotal in helping other people reach their goals. Thus, advisors should start the communication and learning process with where the clients are and what they perceive as meaningful and understandable (Rogers 1969). Advisors need be respectful and honest and to give farmers unconditional positive recognition. In other words, they must create what Rogers (2003, 2004) denotes as a ‘therapeutic atmosphere’ or ‘climate’. Advisors must show reliability, competence, trustworthiness, impartiality, and the ability to empathize with clients’ needs and problems (Engel 1997; Waldenstrom 2002). Trust, respect, and a good relationship between farmers and advisors are important if they are to learn from each other (Sewell et al.

2014; De Rosa et al. 2014). Given a high level of confidence, the learning outcome of farmers increases if the advisor challenges them and questions their working practices (Hansen 2015). Understanding-oriented communication (Karterud 2006), where both parties work toward a common understanding, is also an important part of an advisor's skills. This relates to what Andersen (2004) denotes as the profile of the advisor and how the profile influences the interaction with farmers.

These perspectives embrace an individual's relational competence, which implies having a reflective view on how the context influences the interaction, knowing oneself, showing empathy, and being able to facilitate fruitful relations and interactions (Røkenes and Hanssen 2015, 43). It differs from action competence (Karterud 2006), which includes instrumental knowledge and skills. We think the advisors' relational competence influences how the farmer perceives the advisor and the inter-subjectivity. Thus, advisors need a combination of relational and professional competence to succeed in meetings with farmers.

Power and role identification

Power can be defined as the 'chance to put through their own will in social intercourse, although other participants in the collective life should resist' (Weber 1971). Thus, power is a property of all social relations. Basically, the farmer is the owner of a company and is supposed to be the principal, but the asymmetric division of power turns this upside down. The advisor possesses expert knowledge and also has the greatest power (e.g., Petersen 1993). For example, Tine defines how herd recordings should be done. Furthermore, the advisor also possesses power in what Goffmann (1974) denotes as 'definition of the situation'. When actors exchange messages, they simultaneously frame what subjects should and should not be discussed without explicitly reflecting upon it.

Similarly, Bourdieu's (1996) notion of 'symbolic capital' involves convincing others to adopt one's own notions of reality, such as what should be considered normal or deviant. For example, if the cowshed is filthy or the milk quality is bad, Tine can decide to stop collecting milk. In 2016, Tine stopped collecting milk from 210 farmers due to bad quality. Although most managed to improve their quality and start up again quickly, this example illustrates that Tine and the advisors possess considerable power over farmers. Furthermore, if herd recordings are incomplete, Tine can decide not to approve them. On the other hand, the change to more services being paid for by the farmer has contributed to moving power towards the farmer. To help the farmer and facilitate learning, both parties must contribute to create a good relational quality during visits. For advisors, this is a demanding situation. They must subordinate themselves to a relational division of power. We agree with Nikolova et al. (2009) and Gray et al. (1997) that understanding the power dynamics in the discussion of client–consultant interactions will contribute to greater understanding of the process. Particularly interesting is that the power of advisors opens opportunities for taking different roles, ranging from coach to inspector.

Data and methods

The cases

Traditionally, all services from Tine's advisory service were financed by the cooperative, but nowadays, farmers pay for services beyond the annual mandatory visit. The advisors have personal sales targets for services and are trained in using a coaching advisory style. Thus, advisors and farmers are supposed to participate in defining problems and constructing solutions (Faure et al. 2012).

When selecting advisors and farmers, our aim was to represent variation along dimensions like geography and 'types' of farmers and advisors. The fact that advisors had to

say they were willing to participate, could cause systematic biases. There is also a risk that the advisors have chosen the easiest farmers to visit. Thus there is reason to believe that we ended up with farm visits that are average or better than average. The study was conducted in two regions of Norway during spring 2016, with six cases in Trøndelag and four in Hordaland. A case consists of two farm visits per advisor and interviews with farmers and advisors. The farmers' ages range from 30 to 55 years, and their dairy herd sizes range from 16 to 50 cows. All ten farmers are men, but spouses attended two of the advisor visits. The advisor ages range from 29 to 60 years, with experience from 5 to 38 years. Two advisors are women and three are men. Their education spans from agricultural school to master's degrees. We denote advisors with an A and farmers with an F. For example, A1 means advisor number one, and F12 means farmer number two visited by advisor number one.

Methods

We held semi-structured interviews with farmers after visits and with advisors both before and after visits. To answer the research question empirically and ensure both internal and external validity, the context and situation should be close to the real world. Thus, we used participating observation. One researcher attended each farm visit, made recordings, and took notes, but did not interfere with the conversation. Witnessing the advisor client interactions gave deeper insights than what is possible through interviews only. This method is well suited to study relations between informants and facilitates focus on the research questions (Thagaard 2010). The researcher can obtain rich information and an insider's viewpoint. On the other hand, bias and reactivity are magnified in participating observation. To avoid these potential error sources, we informed the advisors and farmers beforehand about the purpose of the study. We also assured them that all information obtained would be confidential. Similarly, when interpreting data, we did our utmost to avoid letting our own views come into play.

After transcription, all three researchers analyzed the recordings. Following recommendations for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), we read all cases to obtain an overall idea of what they conveyed. We then used NVivo software to code interviews with both data-driven and theory-driven coding. All researchers defined and discussed all themes and determined for the overall story from the data. We identified 28 themes, such as the type of communication or whether the advisor challenged the farmer, and we selected the most relevant ones.

The empirical study

Role identification, competence, and context

For all five advisors, checking the herd recordings is an important part of preparing for visits. However, advisors use this information differently during visits. Some advisors have a clear purpose of the visit, as A4 put it:

One part of the visit is to ensure that the herd data from the farmer are correct. Beyond that, for the farmer, we try to find areas for improvement and present them. Or we can find out what the difficulties are and make the farmers detect their errors and come up with them....and if they do not, we may have to help them.

Similarly, A3 also emphasizes the importance of controlling the herd recordings and the farm:

The visit is done to check that everything is in order, both animal welfare and areas where the farmer should improve. It is also done to check the herd recordings. Then it is to challenge the farmers on areas where they can improve... we see them in the cards and can help to find areas of improvement.

The phrase ‘to see them in the cards’ clearly reflects that A3 assumes an inspector role and is aware of his power. Both A3 and A4 emphasize their own roles in detecting possible areas of improvement. This somewhat contrasts to a coaching advisory style, where farmers are supposed to set the agenda and decide themes to work on. This role identity with the advisor as an expert reduces the farmers’ role to a recipient of advice. A good example is when A3 visited farmer F32 and his wife, who are in their forties. They recently built a new cowshed with robotic milking. Initially, both seemed somewhat hesitant about the visit, and A3 looked bothered to occupy their valuable time. A3 did not discuss the agenda, and after praising their effort in starting the new cowshed, he handed out copies of the herd recordings. Thus, A3 took power over the situation and kept it for the rest of the visit when asking questions about the recordings. The couple answered politely, but it was obvious that the conversation was based in a sense of duty. They asked few questions and looked bored. Thus, inter-subjectivity was low. After one hour, the husband received a phone call and left the room, and shortly after the husband’s return, the wife left the room. Thus, they both used their power to retreat from the session. We asked A3 what he thought about the visit:

I’m not sure.... But I praised them, and I think they were left with a good feeling. At least I hope so. But how useful they think it was, of that I’m more uncertain.

While A3 was doubtful about the outcome of the visit, F32 had a clear opinion: ‘Well, it was alright, but regarding the usefulness—not too much I’d say’. Taking into account that the couple had invested millions in the cowshed, one would expect them to have several topics to discuss with an advisor, as F32 admitted:

F32: Yes, there are many topics I would like to know more about, the milking robot, herd fertility, and the economy.

Interviewer: Could these topics have been discussed at this visit?

F32: Well, I’m not sure whether he (A3) is the right person, it is more interesting to have someone who really knows the different subjects...who can contribute something.

F32 questions A3’s professional authority, which explains the couple’s low expectations about the visit’s outcome. Notably, F32 hires another advisor from Tine who specializes in milking robots, and F32 thinks his knowledge is much more relevant. We noticed how the advisor’s role identification influences the outcome of the visits and the importance of the advisor’s professional knowledge. Clearly, A3 had not updated his knowledge to match the totally new context on this farm.

In contrast, A3’s visit to F31 tells another story. F31 is planning a farm expansion over the next ten years. A3 used the same approach as with F32 and went straight on to handing out copies of the herd recordings. A3 initiated by saying, ‘I need an overview of what has happened since the last visit’. The following sequence from the conversation was typical:

A3: But if we look at the beef production, you have delivered nine young cows for slaughter... but nine are quite a few then...

F31: Yes

A3: Similarly, nine older cows are registered as slaughtered...and the mean weight is 281 kg

F31: Yes

F31 simply confirms A3’s assumptions and sometimes provides additional information. Thus, the visit was more about updating the advisor than the farmer. Had A3 instead asked himself, ‘Is it my own or the farmers needs I am trying to satisfy now?’, this would have indicated a higher level of introspection. However, unlike the other visit, the

parties at least had a dialogue, and F31 made it a priority to attend the visit. However, although F31 listened carefully, he was not eager to obtain more knowledge or advice from A3 and asked few questions. It was also evident that F31 did not view A3 as a professional authority either, which contributed to the medium degree of inter-subjectivity. It was apparent that A3 had requested the visit. However, F31 gained much practical help from A3. For example, A3 phones him if there is a problem with the milk quality. F31 adds: 'And if I need help with other farm disciplines, he helps me contact the right person'.

F31 was satisfied with the visit. One reason for his greater satisfaction than F32 is his different expectations about A3's competence: 'I think it's good... he knows a little about a very wide range of disciplines, and that is his job.' Thus, F32 does not expect A3 to specialize in a particular subject but to have an overview. F31's different phase of farming also explains why he is more satisfied. A3's advisory style and competence fit better with farms in a state of "business as usual".

The female advisors A1 and A5 have different perceptions of the job. Similar to A3, A1 prepares by checking the herd data, but she uses this preparation as only background information. She takes a supporting role:

As advisors, we are supposed to be an interlocutor for the farmer and support them in their choices. If we think they are totally off course, we try to adjust it and give them some alternatives. And we should challenge them, and come up with some practical advice if necessary.

A1 is an empathic advisor who cares for the farmers, an attitude she expresses clearly to them. This allows her to use direct speech towards farmers when necessary. She reflected upon this and showed introspection: 'But of course I cannot behave like that everywhere, I do it because I'm confident that he (the farmer) and the whole family know I want the best for them'.

Thus, she observes herself and exhibits well-developed self-perspective, which enables her to enter the relation with farmers in a confidence-building way. A5 has a similar role identity:

What is good about the way we practice advising in Tine is that the farmer is at the center. One should try to listen to what he wants... We are there to help them, not to control. As a consultant, you should clarify the farmers' needs and find out what they are interested in. Often they have some goals but no plan for how to reach them. Then we can support them and coach them, and perhaps suggest an action plan.

A5 also shows introspection when she reflects upon how she has developed in the role as an advisor:

A5: When I started, I was too conscientious when considering what an advisor should do. Instead of using common sense, I was very much concerned with goals and measures...

Interviewer: You had a checklist?

A5: Yes, and an agenda that was too tight. What happens then is that you risk forgetting what the farmer is thinking about... Now I have become more relaxed with farmers I know well and involve them in setting the agenda.

Thus, A5 reflects upon how her speech and actions affect the farmer. She also shows confidence in the advisory role and that she has made the job her own. A5 also showed empathy and exhibited high relational competence:

Of course, it is tempting to comment if they do not fill the milk quota and they work outside the farm.... But if their goal is to deliver only 80 % of the quota and have an okay life, then it is not for me to tell them that they should produce more.

In contrast, A4 used a very purposeful communication style when he visited F42. A4 repeatedly tried to persuade F42 to expand his farm, without recognizing that F42 was not yet ready for such a decision. The result was that F42 felt he needed to excuse himself.

The female advisors practice more of a coaching style (Moen 2013) compared to their male colleagues, and they leave more power in the farmer's hands. Their communication is more directed towards understanding, yet they also make use of purposeful communication, but mainly in purely practical tasks. They also more adeptly switch between the two communication styles. Following recommendations by Rogers (1969), they start communication with where the clients are and what they perceive as meaningful. Before the visit to F52, A5 reflected upon how the visit would be:

I took a printout of the herd data, but if farmers are about to embark on a building process, that is often their only focus. So my plan is to adapt the visit to what he is concerned with.

Upon arriving at the farm, the farmer had already started the excavation work for the new cowshed, and the whole visit revolved around the new project. They discussed included how F52 could provide enough milk and cows to fill the quota and how he could obtain more farmland. A5 also helped him to make a milk forecast. Then they discussed the drawings of the cowshed in detail. In this session, the learning outcome for both parties was high:

A5: Usually, we do not recommend putting up a wall here, because it hinders the cow traffic

F52: Yes, you mean not to put up a wall at all?

A5: Yes because the cows will have a better overview when they walk around here.....And those who put up walls often tear them down again.

F52: Yes... I had not thought about that until now.

A5 took most of the initiative, yet the farmer was very interested and asked many questions. They understood each other well, and the inter-subjectivity was high. This session clearly shows the importance of the advisors' professional knowledge. F52 was very satisfied with the visit and the collaboration with A5: 'I think we collaborate well, she gives constructive criticism, and that's what we farmers need'. He told us why he trusts in A5:

Yes I do as she tells me....because at the first visit we decided to change the feeding of the calves, and the results came immediately. That is why we trust in her.

As this passage shows, professional skills and knowledge combined with high relational competence are efficient in building trust and high inter-subjectivity.

Challenging the farmers and how to do it

A1 and A5's coaching advisory style does not preclude them from challenging the farmers. F11 had experienced tough times in recent years, which included a strained economy. He explains how A1 differs from other advisors:

Yes, she is perhaps more assertive than the one we had before, and tells us the truth. She speaks straight from the heart.

An example is when A1 commented on the slaughter weight of the cows: 'But look at the cows—they are outrageously fat when you slaughter them'. However, F11 obviously appreciated being challenged: 'Yes we need a wake-up call now and then... But of course farmers are different'. Because F11's farm is in a state of "business as usual", most of the conversation was at the operational level. However, A1 sometimes also changed her focus to

the strategic level. Thus, she challenged F11 on both robotic milking and organic farming, and they agreed to calculate the profitability of converting. One reason why A1 can challenge F11 is that she had been his advisor for several years. She also exhibits high relational competence during the conversation, switching between challenging and praising F11 and his wife: 'And look at the milk quality...that's unbelievable, the cell count is so low'. A1 also uses humor, and there is much laughter in the transcripts. Thus, she manages to create a good atmosphere and engage both the husband and wife. All parties dare to show vulnerability, partly because there was no doubt about A1's intentions, as F11 commented: 'She really wants the best for both the animals and the farmer, that I have understood'. The communication between the advisor and the farmer is good. The farmer is satisfied with the advisor's language and how she presents knowledge. A1 is also satisfied with F11, and overall, the inter-subjectivity is high.

Three farmers called for the male advisors to challenge them more. F41 was one of them: 'What's important is that the advisor does not just beat around the bush you know, but tells me how it is and how I can improve my farming results'. F31 also thinks A3 should challenge him more:

The former advisor was better at that. We purchased bull calves for feeding, and he asked us, 'Do you make money on this?' Thus, we started calculating the profitability, and we ended up focusing on milk instead.

All ten farmers expect to be challenged by their advisors. If they are not, the conversation often becomes insufficiently concrete, or the farmers spend most of their valuable time updating the advisors, and the learning outcome for the farmer is low. Taken together, the interviews revealed that the farmers with female advisors were more satisfied than those with male advisors. The females exhibit higher relational competence and ask better questions, which challenge the farmers and keep them on track.

Discussion and conclusion

This study differs from most consultant-client studies in that the consultants have significantly more power over their clients than what is common in consulting literature. The important aspect of this power difference is that it gives the advisors relatively large room to define their own advisory role. There seems to be interplay between how this power manifests itself and the advisors' competence. If advisors feel they lack relevant professional knowledge or relational competence, they tend to emphasize the control part. The farmer easily ends up as a passive consumer, as suggested by Alvesson et al. (2009). Compared to payment services, the mandatory farm visit leaves the farmer with few other options than to pay attention. However, as advice is becoming more and more demand driven, the power of the farmer as the ultimate decision maker must be a consideration. Our findings clearly indicate that not all farmers would have bought this service if they had to pay for it, while others would.

Our findings indicate that the mandatory farm visit is harder for advisors than payment services, partly because the advisor has more power. Furthermore, paid services are often more clearly defined, as are the farmer's expectations. If farmers are dissatisfied, they will not repurchase the service. Clearer expectations from the farmer may also contribute to sharpening both the consultant and the farmer and thus their effort to make the service useful. However, the female advisors particularly demonstrate that it is possible to combine high formal power with a coaching advisory style. Thus, the advisor's role identification and relational competence determine the degree of inter-subjectivity and the farmers' satisfaction with the visit.

As Nikolova et al. (2009) and Sturdy et al. (2009) predicted, access to what clients and consultants do jointly certainly enriches our understanding of the complexity of the

consultant-client relationship. There are substantial differences between advisors in how well they interact with farmers and their relational competence. Of course, how well the advisor and the farmer match also plays a role. Furthermore, an interesting finding is that farmers and advisors can have different opinions about the outcome of the visit. Farmers may evaluate the visit based on their professional usefulness, while advisors may evaluate it based on how they perceive their own role and tasks. The conclusions can be quite different. Furthermore, the same advisor can obtain different feedback from different farmers—for example, due to different expectations or farming contexts. Trust in the advisor’s professional competence also contributes to explaining how satisfied farmers are. If the advisor uses the same approach regardless of the farmer and the farming context, some farmers end up dissatisfied. Our findings clearly show the importance of adapting to each farmer and the specific context, in line with Rogers (1969).

The farmers expect to be challenged. An important finding is that challenging the farmers helps to keep the conversation on track, to avoid beating around the bush, and to talk about other farmers and agricultural policy in general. However, to challenge farmers, the advisors need high relational competence, as emphasized by Røkenes and Hanssen (2015) and Sewell et al. (2014). Furthermore, the farmers must feel that the advisor has updated professional knowledge to contribute, in line with the findings of De Rosa et al. (2014).

An interesting finding is that the two female advisors received better feedback than their male colleagues. In short, they practice advising in the way they are trained to. Future studies could explore whether there are female and male styles of advising and the feedback from farmers in more detail.

In conclusion, the relationship between advisors and farmers is complex in a setting where the advisor has substantial formal power. It leaves room for advisors to hold different perceptions of when they have done a good job. These perceptions influence the degree of inter-subjectivity, how satisfied farmers are, and how power manifests in the relation. Farmers’ diversity, expectations, and farming context can explain why different farmers evaluate the same advisor differently. The advisor’s relational competence is crucial to achieving high inter-subjectivity and satisfied farmers. Similarly, relevant professional competence and the ability to challenge the farmer in a trusting way are pivotal.

Practical implications

Tine’s advisory service could try to separate the control function from the farm visit to obtain a clear distinction between advisory and control tasks. The control could be taken care of by special advisors, who might have this as their only task. This could clarify the advisor role for both advisors and farmers. Another way to leave more power with the farmers is to let them choose advisors themselves, which would allow farmers in different phases of farming to access advisors who meet their specific needs. Furthermore, the services that advisors can provide could be defined more clearly. Increased consciousness among advisors about their different roles and training are also tasks to follow up.

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