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Consulting: what and how?

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Thought Leadership is an easy form of marketing for we consultants, once we've decided where to start! Today I'll start at the start, reviewing some of the key terms used in our conversations with clients. The idea came from a discussion this week with a prospective consultant, who was on her way to a job interview. She asked,

- how do consultants describe what they do?
- what makes for an excellent consultant?
- what will the consulting firm would be looking for in any potential recruit?

What is *success* in consulting?

A successful consultant is one whose advice and work is accepted and acted upon, according to consulting guru Peter Block (*Flawless Consulting*).

If your advice is accepted, and it works, then:

- the client has the solution they desire - because that's why clients engage consultants - to solve a problem or to exploit an opportunity.
- the client is more likely to bring you back for fresh engagements, or ask you to take them to the next stage of development.
- the client is more likely to recommend you to others they know.

Many consulting firms do more than create the solution. They implement it as well.

Your three skill sets

1. Professional skills

All consultants need subject matter expertise. Consultants are often called SME's. This is your technical or professional field of skill. It enables you to do the technical side of problem solving, sometimes called the 'content' of your work.

2. Consulting Skills

These enable you to apply your technical skill in the client's business so that the client can use what you deliver. So it involves working out how your solution needs to be designed, delivered and accepted by the client, their staff and their stakeholders, including their customers and clients.

Most consultants follow a 'consulting process' to ensure that this is achieved. Good process will enable you to gain a clear understanding about the real needs of the client. And that might be different from what the client says!

It's also about building client engagement and dealing with the myriad of people issues. These include winning support from people in many situations, with varying expectations and in dealing with change. It's also about navigating political situations and managing risk.

And it applies as much for consultancy work involving a change to the technical systems in an organisation as it does to changes involving process improvement and restructuring.

3. Relationship skills

This is the capacity to build meaningful relationships with people in the course of business. Over time successful consultants develop a network of people that they both nurture and utilise. Experienced consultants confidently assert that 'consulting is a people business'.

There's a view that 'relationship skills' is a sub-set of consulting skills. I make it a special category because it's about maintaining connections once the job has been done. It's this network that will give you your career, as you support others in theirs. It gives your consulting team its business. Developing these skills will facilitate your effectiveness in consulting as you realise every consulting situation has a human element. The automatic timer still needs checking and servicing.

Two valuable behaviours

1. Influence

The successful consultant will have influence. While managers have situational power, consultants at best, can only have influence.

The path to influence can be both strategic and tactical. Some people have charisma and that just gives them influence. Aristotle defined the path to influence a long time ago when, if I may paraphrase, he said that we need to look the part, make sense (argue logically and coherently) and, that we need to engage the client on the emotional plane.

This latter aspect was detailed by David Maister and his co-writers in 2000 of "The Trusted Advisor". This role has now become the acknowledged goal of most practitioners in consulting.

2. Collaboration

The desirable role is to be the 'collaborative consultant' who partners their client. In doing so, there will be a time to facilitate, a time to be the expert and for some, a time to be the 'pair of hands'. Collaboration as a default mode, is more likely to see success in both the engagement and in your career.

What do consulting firms want?

Professionally competent 'experts' who are prepared to suspend their assumptions, ask questions and to listen more than they speak. They are experts who avoid the 'expert pitfall' of rushing to the solution. They are prepared to step out of their 'expert' role to collaborate with their client: to partner and take time to clarify context and causes.

As David Maister says, they listen for what's different, rather than for what's familiar. They avoid telling their own stories too early, but rather hear what the client and the user (staffer) has to say, and then ask, "... and what else?" They use their ego's to buffer what others might take as criticism, realising that often consulting work involves changing other people's comfortable situations. They build their influence. They are good communicators. And much more ...

Coming up

Do you know someone considering transitioning into consulting? There are specialist workshops available for them at **Rydges Capital Hill, Canberra, November 5, 6 and 7.**

For more go to <http://www.consultanttraining.com.au/workshops.htm>

All workshops will proceed once five attendees have enrolled. Please either book your place or phone/email us to register your interest.

All the best to you with your consulting!



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Specialist in Consulting Business Skills

Author: *Consulting, Contracting & Freelancing: be your own boss*
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