The Consultant's Role

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It is made up of material contained in four of my books: Managing the Professional Service Firm *(Free Press, 1993),* True Professionalism *(Free Press, 1997),* The Trusted Advisor *and* Practice What You Preach *(Free Press, 2001).*

Early in my career, the management team of a large professional firm asked my opinion about how they were conducting their affairs. I responded with a very honest, direct and candid answer—"Here are the things you are messing up, and this is what you should have been doing!" To my surprise, I was fired for being a disruptive influence. This was hard to understand, since I knew (and I knew that *they* knew) that I was correct in my diagnosis and prescriptions.

Eventually, I learned the obvious lesson. It is not enough for a consultant to be *right*: An advisor's job is to be *helpful*. I had to "earn" the right to be critical. Critiquing one's clients is, *by definition*, a part of every consultant's job, since suggestions on how to improve things *always* imply that all is not being done well at the moment. We must not only be smart, we must be diplomatic, sensitive and gentle—and behave in such a way that we are trusted!

Many consultants approach the task of giving advice as if it were an objective, rational exercise based on their technical knowledge and expertise. However, consulting is almost never an exclusively logical process. Rather, it is almost always an emotional "duet" played between the consultant and the client. If you can't learn to recognize, deal with and respond to client emotions (and client politics), you will never be an effective consultant.

To see how the success of your career depends on these things, consider your own purchases of professional services. Whether you are hiring someone to look after your legal affairs, your taxes, your child or your car, the act of retaining a professional requires you to put your affairs in someone else's hands. You are forced into an act of faith, and you can only hope that the person you choose will deal with you appropriately. When the final decision on whom to hire comes, you must ultimately decide to trust someone with your "baby," which is never a comfortable thing to do.

Here are some other common emotions you and your clients might feel when selecting and working with an outside advisor:

1. I'm feeling <u>insecure</u>. I'm not sure I know how to tell which of the finalists is the genius and which is just good. I've exhausted my abilities to make technical distinctions.

2. I'm feeling <u>threatened</u>. This is my area of responsibility, and even though

intellectually I know I need outside expertise, emotionally it's not comfortable to put my affairs in the hands of others.

3. I'm taking a <u>personal risk</u>. By putting my affairs in the hands of someone else, I risk losing control.

4. I'm <u>impatient</u>. I didn't call in someone at the first sign of symptoms (or opportunity). I've been thinking about this for a while.

5. I'm <u>worried</u>. By the very fact that they are suggesting improvements or changes, these people going to be implying that I haven't been doing it right up till now. Are these people going to be on my side?

6. I'm <u>exposed.</u> Whoever I hire, I'm going to have to reveal some proprietary secrets, not all of which are flattering.

7. I'm feeling <u>ignorant</u>, and don't like the feeling. I don't know if I've got a simple problem or a complex one. I'm not sure I can trust them to be honest about that: it's in their interest to convince me that it's complex.

8. I'm <u>skeptical</u>. I've been burned before by these kinds of people. You get a lot of promises. How do I know whose promise I should buy?

9. I'm <u>concerned</u> that they either can't or won't take the time to understand what makes my situation special. They'll try to sell me what they've got rather than what I need.

10. I'm <u>suspicious</u>. Will they be those typical consultants who are hard to get hold of, who are patronizing, who leave you out of the loop, who befuddle you with jargon, who don't explain what they're doing or why, who..., who...., who...? In short, will these people deal with me in the way I want to be dealt with?

What all this shows is that when retaining and working with a consultant, what you (and your clients) want is someone who understands your interests, and will not put their interests ahead of yours while working for you. You want someone you can trust to do the right thing. You want someone who will *care*.

Have you ever had a trusted advisor? Someone you turned to in order to help you solve your problems? What made them so helpful to you? Here is a listing of traits that great trusted advisors have in common. They

1. Seem to understand us, effortlessly, and like us
2. Are consistent: we can depend on them
3. Always help us see things from fresh perspectives
4. Don't try to force things on us
5. Help us think things through (but make sure that it's our decision)
6. Don't substitute their judgment for ours
7. Don't panic or get overemotional; they stay calm
8. Help us *think* and separate our logic from our emotions
9. Criticize and correct us gently and lovingly
10. Don't pull their punches: we can rely on them to tell us the truth
11. Are in it for the long haul (the relationship is more important than the current issue)
12. Give us reasoning (to help us think), not just their conclusions
13. Give us options, increase our understanding of those options, give us their recommendation and let us choose

14. Challenge our assumptions and help us uncover the false assumptions we've been working under
15. Make us feel comfortable and casual personally (but take the issues seriously)
16. Act like a person, not someone in a role
17. Are reliably on our side, and always seem to have our interests at heart
18. Remember everything we ever said (without notes)
19. Are always honorable: they don't gossip about others, so we can trust their values
20. Help us put our issues in context, often through the use of metaphors, stories and anecdotes (few problems are completely unique)
21. Have a sense of humor to diffuse (our) tension in tough situations
22. Are smart (sometimes in ways we're not)

What is significant about this list is that it is only in small part about intellectual skills. Equally critical are the items we are rarely taught: social skills, interpersonal skills and, above all, emotional skills. All are critical to being a successful consultant.

Focus on the other Person

There is an old saying from Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*): "You'll have more fun and success when you stop trying to get what you want and start helping other people get what they want."

For some this sounds like an idealistic spiritual or religious principle. Others may think of it as communism: a cry to place others before yourself. However, a moment's reflection will reveal that the aphorism is the very definition of what a capitalist exchange economy is about. To get what you want from someone, you must first focus on giving them what they want!

This is harder than it looks. In the midst of a conversation with a client, we are likely to find ourselves thinking things like "How will I solve this problem?" "How will I get the client to buy this idea?" "What am I going to say when the client finishes talking?" "How can I appear expert?" We're not thinking about them. We're thinking about our reactions to them. We're thinking about ourselves.

If we strip down all these distractions to their core, we are likely to find fear: fear of embarrassment, of failure, of appearing ignorant or incompetent, or fear of loss of reputation or security. Ironically, the professions attract people who are prone to these fears.

More often than not, we consultants are high achievers who have consistently overcome our fears through constant application of skill and hard work in the pursuit of technical mastery. And, up to a point, these things are rewarded. In the early levels of consulting life, we are often asked to focus on little else.

Then comes that crucial career transition from technician to full professional, from content expert to advisor. As technicians, our task is to provide information, analyses, research, content and even recommendations. All of these are basically tasks performed out of the clients' presence. In contrast, our task as advisors is an "in-person" and "in-contact" challenge to help the client see things anew or to make a decision. This requires a complete change of skills and mindset.

It can be unsettling to find that the client is primarily interested in having his or her problem understood, in all its emotional and political complexity, as a precondition to having the problem diagnosed and solved. Some of us never make it over this hurdle. The key to prior career success (technical excellence) can actually become an impediment at this level.

The types of people who typically succeed in consultant service firms are driven, rational and meritocratic, with a high need to achieve. It is the natural thing for such people to stay focused on their own individual performance (something that is reinforced by many firm cultures) and to look for confirmation that what *they* are doing is all right. This is not a situation conducive to building skills in developing trust. It is in some sense a wonder that so many do so well.

Another prime obstacle to focusing successfully on the other person is the apparently common belief that mastery of technical content is sufficient to serve clients well. It is ironic that a business in which the serving of clients depends so heavily on interpersonal psychology should be peopled with those who believe in the *exclusive* power of technical mastery.

The professions are havens of rationality for those less comfortable with a more direct, emotional approach to life. Good social skills and an excellent mind, in the professions, can generally compensate for a very large degree of emotional avoidance. Combined with an ethos that worships the mind, it is not surprising that some advisors feel that working on consulting skills such as intimacy is risky and uncomfortable.

An Example

I once had to hire a lawyer to probate a relative's will. The first few lawyers I spoke with tried to win my business by telling me when their firm was founded (really!), how many offices they had and how much they would charge. None of this inspired much confidence. In fact, the more they talked about themselves and their firms, the less interested they appeared to be in me and my problems.

Finally I encountered a lawyer who, in the initial phone call, asked how much I knew about probating a will. My reply was "Nothing!" The lawyer then offered to fax to me a comprehensive outline of the steps involved, what I needed to rush to do and what I should forget about for a while because it was not urgent. The fax also provided the phone numbers of all the governmental bodies I needed to notify, even though this had nothing to do with the legal work (or the lawyer's fees).

All of this (immensely helpful) information was provided freely (and for free) before the lawyer had been retained. Naturally, he got the business. He had built confidence by demonstrating that he knew what information was most relevant to me, even though some of it had nothing to do with the practice of estate law. He had earned trust by being generous with his knowledge and by proving that he was willing to earn the potential client's business. He wasn't focused on himself: he was focused on me, and it was irresistible!

Professional or Prostitute?

Whenever a consultant is trying to sell something, there is only one question on the client's mind: "Why are you trying to sell me something?" There are two possible conclusions the client could come to. First, he or she might believe that the consultant is trying to sell something just to get more revenue. Or the client might believe that the consultant is trying to sell something because he or she is interested in the client, truly cares and is sincerely trying to help.

Under what conditions is the sale made? It should be clear that new business will be won only to the extent that the client believes that the consultant is interested, cares and is trying to help. The noble path wins. One *could* argue that the consultant's task is to make the client *think* that the consultant cares, meaning that consultants must learn how to fake sincerity. (Indeed, many sales training courses are filled with such tips and tactics.) However, faking sincerity is a prostitute's tactic, not a professional's. It may work occasionally, but not as often as real sincerity.

Is this moral counsel or business advice? Either way, the conclusion is the same. You will get hired, rehired, obtain referrals and have lessened fee sensitivity to the extent that you care passionately, both about your work and your clients. Believe passionately in what you do, and never knowingly compromise your standards and values. Act like a true professional, aiming for true excellence, and the money will follow. Act like a prostitute, with an attitude of "I'll do it for the money, but don't expect me to care," and you'll lose the premium that excellence earns. True professionalism wins!

How Much Do You Care?

Very few consultants become known by their clients as "great" purely as a result of their intellectual or technical abilities. The opposite of the word "professional" is not "unprofessional"—the opposite of professional is "technician." Professionalism is predominantly an attitude, not a set of competencies. A real professional is a technician who cares. (You may recall the old slogan, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.")

One of my favorite discussion questions is to ask people, "Why do you do what you do?" Too many consultants don't do what they do because they want to help their clients: they're in it only for the money or the personal prestige. Such consultants may become good—and even earn good incomes—but they will never be considered great. The reason is simple: the clients can tell! (If you're not sure you believe this, draw on your own experiences as a buyer. Can you tell if your doctor really cares, showing an interest in you as an individual? Does it matter to you? Can you tell if your accountant is just sticking to the technical tasks or is thinking ahead on your behalf? Does it matter? Does it affect your buying behavior?)

Being a professional is neither about making money nor about your professional fulfillment. Both of these are consequences of an unqualified dedication to excellence in serving clients and their needs.

Perhaps it is time for our schools and our consultant firms to stop teaching students that they are the best and the brightest, the special elite in the noblest profession of all (whatever that profession happens to be). Maybe schools and firms should find ways to teach more about what it is to *serve* a client, and about how to work with *people* (not just business problems). When I talk with business school alumni about their careers and what they would do differently, the most common reply is "I wish I had paid more attention to the courses about dealing with people."

Consulting success requires more than talent. Among other things, it requires drive, initiative, commitment, involvement and, above all, enthusiasm. Yet these things are often missing from consultants' lives. Consider the following quiz.

Think back on all the work you have done in the past year or so, and divide it into one of three categories. The first category is "God, I love this! *This* is why I do what I do!" The second category is "It's O.K., I can tolerate it—it's what I do for a living." The last category is "I hate this part—I wish I could get rid of this junk!" Before reading on, estimate your answers to this question.

Figured it out? Then let me report the results of putting this question to top consultants in prestige firms around the world. The typical answers I am given are 20 to 25 percent for "God, I love this!"; 60 to 70 percent for "I can tolerate it"; and 5 to 20 percent for "I hate this part." In other words, the typical consultant in a top firm is (I am told) positively enjoying his or her work about one day a week.

Now, a second question: Think about all the clients you have served in the past year and, again, divide them into one of three categories. Category one is "I like these people and their industry fascinates me." (Yes, I know, I'm combining two things.) Category two is "I can tolerate these people and their business is O.K.—neither fascinating nor boring." Category three is "I'm professional enough that I would never say this to them, and I'll still do my best for them, but the truth is these are not my kind of people and I have no interest in their industry."

Ready to compare results? Typical answers from top consultants around the world are 30 to 35 percent for "I like these people," 50 to 60 percent for "I can tolerate them," and 15 to 20 percent for "I really don't care for them." (I must stress that these are not *my* opinions about professional life, but what individuals in top-drawer firms tell me about their work lives.)

These estimates provide the single biggest reason to reintroduce some energy into your professional life and into the process of client development. Why spend the majority of your professional life working on *tolerable* stuff for *acceptable* clients when, with some effort in (for example) client relations, marketing and selling, you can spend your days working on exciting things for interesting people? Do you really want to have your tombstone say "He (or she) spent his life doing tolerable stuff for people he could tolerate, because they paid him?"

A consultant should build the skills involved in practice development (generating business) for one main reason: the better you are at getting hired, the better your chances of working on fun stuff for people you can care about and the less you will be forced to take on work and clients you don't truly enjoy. You won't be forced to take on clients simply because you need the money.

As my probate lawyer, described above, illustrated, getting hired has no magic to it. If you really *are* interested in a client, and can clearly demonstrate both your ability and willingness to help them, you can earn their trust. The biggest trouble for many consultants is that they haven't taken the time to figure out who they do like. You don't have to like every client—indeed, that's the whole point, you can't. You need to figure it out. Now!

When one reviews who is successful (and happy) among consultants, it quickly emerges that it has nothing to do with IQ, where they went to school, or what training they received. Those who succeed are those who can sustain the magic and excitement they felt when they were first setting out to build a career and were willing to work to make it happen. All it takes to find the fun is a little energy, excitement, ambition, drive, enthusiasm—and passion! However, so scarce are these characteristics today they have turned out to be the dominant competitive advantage for both individual consultants and firms.

The good news is that professionalism and marketing are not in conflict with each other at all: They are the same thing. Both are defined by a dedication to being of service and helping people.

Building Business Relationships

In our ordinary lives, when we want to build a strong relationship we try to be understanding, thoughtful, considerate, sensitive to feelings and supportive. All of these adjectives apply equally well to what is needed to build a strong business relationship.

To earn a relationship, you must go first. The client must visibly perceive that you are willing to be the first to make an investment in the relationship in order to earn and deserve it. You want to get hired by someone someday? Find a way to be helpful to them now. Even if it's only a small gesture, give something.

Small gestures can count as much as big ones, as long as they don't become too rote. Take the issue of proving or demonstrating that you care about the relationship and value it. On a random day, of no particular significance, call your client and say, "I've been thinking about you, and ran across some information that made me start thinking, and I have an idea for you. I don't think it involves us, I just wanted to contribute the idea to you."

What are you demonstrating by this action? That you care; that you're thinking about the client in the client's terms, not yours; that you are a source of ideas (some good, some not so good); and that you are someone they will want to stay in touch with. Not a bad set of outcomes for such a simple action.

To make anyone believe something about you, you must demonstrate, not assert. For example, your questions can reveal that you have done your homework: "I know by the research we've done on your firm that you merged with [another company] nine years ago to become third largest in the world. What I would like to learn more about is how you cope with the integration challenges of employees from so many cultures and backgrounds."

Such questions give evidence that you are thorough, that you respect the client's time enough to be prepared and that you are ready to get right to the issues.

At the core of building a relationship with someone is convincing them that you are dealing with them as a human being, not as a member of a group or class or subset. Accordingly, as you listen to a client talk, the question on your mind should be "What makes this person different from any other client I've served? What does that mean for what I should say and how I should behave?"

Unfortunately, this is hard work. The natural tendency of most of us is to do the exact opposite: we listen for the things we recognize and have met before, so that we can draw upon past experience to use the words, approaches and tools that we already know well. It's the way most of us work, but it doesn't always serve us well.

Before you can help someone, you need to understand what's on *their* mind. You must create situations where they will tell you more about their issues, concerns and needs.

What Role Are You Playing?

Also essential to being an effective consultant is having a good understanding of your role. This is illustrated by a friend of ours, who once said, "Sometimes I feel like I'm explaining things to a child. My client can't seem to grasp even the basic logic of what I'm trying to convey. I feel like saying 'Shut up; just accept what I'm telling you! I'm the expert here!'"

What makes this friend's comments so understandable is that, in many advisory relationships, the client may be untrained in the consultant's specialty, while the consultant may have seen the client's problem (or variants of it) many times before. There is for that reason an almost constant threat of coming across to the client as patronizing, pompous and arrogant.

It is understandable why advisors can feel this way, and it is equally clear why clients resent it. After all, when I'm the client, I'm the one in charge. If I don't understand what you are saying, then maybe the problem is you, not me. Maybe you don't know how to convey what you know and understand to a layperson. *Of course* I don't know your field; that's why I hired you! *Explain* it to me in language I can understand. Help me get it! Your job is not just to assert conclusions, but to help me *understand* why your recommended course of action makes sense. Give me reasons, not just instructions!

Excellence in advice-giving requires not only the right attitude but also a careful attention to language. There are always a number of ways of expressing the same thought, each of which differs in how it is received by the listener. Saying "You've got to do X," even when correct, is very likely to evoke emotional resistance. No one likes to be told that they *must* do anything (even when they do).

It is usually better to say something like "Let's go through the options together. These are the ones I see. Can you think of anything else that we should consider? Now let's go through the pros and cons of each course of action. Based on those pros and cons, action X seems the most likely to work, doesn't it? Or can you think of a better solution?"

If the client doesn't want to do X, the conversation is still alive. If you've said, "You've got to do X" and the client says "No, I don't," you've nowhere to go. Your effectiveness as an advisor has just been lost, and you have placed yourself and the client on opposite sides. The odds are that what will follow will be an argument, not a discussion.

In many ways consulting skills are similar to those of great teaching. A teacher's task is to help a student get from point A (what they know, understand and believe now) to point B (an advanced state of deeper understanding and knowledge). It is poor teaching for the professor to stand at the front of the class and say, "B is the right answer!" (As the old joke says, a lecture is the fastest means known for getting ideas from the notes of the teacher into the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either.)

A teacher needs two skills to be really effective. First, the teacher must have a good understanding of point A: Where is the student (or client) starting from? What does he or she understand now? What do they believe and why do they believe it? For what messages are they ready? What are they doing now and why are they doing it that way?

The second required skill is to develop a step-by-step reasoning process that takes the student/client on a journey of discovery. The goal here is to influence the student/client's understanding so that, eventually, the student/client says, "You know, on reflection, I think B is a better answer," to which the teacher/advisor can respond, "OK, that's what we'll do!"

Among other things, effective advice-giving requires an ability to suppress one's own ego and emotional needs. It is immensely tempting once a client describes an issue to jump in, even before the client has finished talking, and say, "Oh, I know the answer to that one, that's easy!" There is no surer way to give offence than to be too overeager to show off one's expertise!

Do You Have the Courage?

The single biggest barrier to success in consulting is courage. Many consultants (and consulting firms) lack the guts to stick with the plans and goals they have set for themselves.

I first learned this lesson some time ago, when I set for myself the goal of trying to become a strategic advisor to international professional firms. Shortly thereafter a firm asked me to accept a project conducting sales and marketing training courses for their people.

The assignment was very attractive: a large volume of familiar, comfortable, enjoyable work that would provide a significant portion of my revenue target for the year. However, it was obvious that spending most of my year doing sales skills training would do nothing to help me achieve my strategic goal. Rather than becoming a strategic advisor, I would, by the end of that year, be a sales trainer.

Taking the expedient path would not have been immoral, but it would have meant that I would not have obtained the benefits of my declared strategy. Obviously, resisting the expedient path is hard. You have to really bet on yourself and believe your own vision. You have to have the courage of your own convictions. Believing in the benefits of your goals is one thing; living by the diets that are necessary to achieve those goals is another.

So which did I want? Easy cash (and it was a *lot*) or an ambitious strategy that would require hard work to create? Did I want a comfortable, well-paid year or one where I had to accept the burden of generating an equivalent number of days of "real" work that would move me toward my strategic goal as well as generate income? I decided to stick with my strategy and pass on the "easy money" opportunity. I arranged for a friend to look after my client, and worked hard (and successfully) to bring in the kind of work that was "on strategy."

All strategies at some time or another involve a tradeoff between short-term cash (doing what's expedient) and executing the strategy (living the vision of excellence you have set for yourself). If you're going to pursue a strategy, you must be willing to make hard choices and act as if you truly believe in your own strategy. In short, having a strategy takes courage.

Business life is filled with daily temptations, short-term expediencies and wonderful excuses why we can't afford to execute our strategy today. Accordingly, that new article never gets written, work is delegated only when it must be (not when it can be), the junior staff remains only "adequately" supervised and the marketing principle is, "We never met a dollar of revenue we didn't like!"

The importance of courage is not meant to be an inspirational point, but simple logic. In business and professional life, you reap the benefits of what you actually do, not what you hope to get around to doing some day if it is convenient and you're not too busy. If you want to be known as excellent at something, then you have to *be* reliably, consistently excellent at that thing.

If you don't feel passionate about it, if you can't *care*, don't become a consultant!

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