Professionalism in Consulting

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(Chapter 2 of *The Contemporary Consultant*, edited by Larry Greiner and Flemming Poulfelt, Thomson-Southwestern, 2005)

Like many profound ideas, "professionalism" is an ambiguous concept used to refer to a wide range of attitudes, skills, values and behaviors. For example, if one asks people what is meant by referring to a consultant as "really professional," one hears a variety of replies. A really professional consultant, I am told,

- Gets involved and doesn't just stick to their assigned role
- Reaches out for responsibility
- Does whatever it takes to get the job done
- Is a team player
- Is observant
- Is honest
- Is loyal
- Really listens to the clients' needs
- Takes pride in their work, and shows a commitment to quality
- Shows initiative

This list indicates some of the differences between a "really professional" consultant and an ordinary consultant. It reveals that a high level of professionalism doesn't stop with a foundation of technical qualifications and analytical skills. In addition to these basic attributes, the right *attitudes* and *behavior* must also be in place, and these become the distinguishing factor for achieving real professionalism. My former business manager, Julie MacDonald O'Leary, said it best: "Professional is not a title you claim for yourself, it's an adjective you hope other people will apply to you. You have to earn it." (David H. Maister, True Professionalism, Free Press, 1997)

"You have to earn it" may not be a bad way to summarize what professionalism is really all about. It means deserving the rewards you wish to gain from others by being dedicated to serving their interests as part of an implied bargain. Professionalism implies that you do not focus only on the immediate transaction, but care about your relationship with the person with whom you are working. It means you can be trusted to put your clients' interests first, can be depended upon to do what you say you will do and will not consistently act for short-term personal gain. Professionals make decisions using principles of appropriate behavior, not just short-term expediency.

Significant efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to "professionalize" consulting by promoting the use of the CMC—Certified Management Consultant—qualification. However, professionalism is not about qualifications and certification. Having an MBA from a name school or official recognition from a trade association or certifying body might say something about your *knowledge,* but these pieces of paper are unlikely to be predictive of your *attitudes* and *behaviors,* and maybe not even your *skills*. No formal qualification will ever provide complete assurance to the buyer that the provider will act appropriately, even if equipped with the required skills.

Forging Attitudes

The B-School Problem

It is not clear how consciously business schools, even those with special programs on consulting, set out to forge the appropriate attitudes for consulting. Through oversight or neglect, they may even sometimes create inappropriate behaviors. For example, many professional schools, whether in the law, business or medicine, work hard to create a sense in their students that they are an elite, the "best and the brightest." This can breed arrogance that later shows up (no matter how unintentionally) as pompous, patronizing, condescending behavior when dealing with clients. "You are the person with the problem; I am the trained expert, so shut up and do what I say." Only in recent years have medical schools begun to provide programs to fight this socialization, and few business or law schools have anything substantive in this area.

Some schools have attempted to tackle the difference between knowledge and skill by building real or simulated consulting projects into the curriculum, but few, if any, are consciously designed to provide a critical examination of the consulting experience by debriefing and exploring issues such as (a) what does it feel like to be a client?; (b) what is the difference between being an expert (providing answers) and being a skilled advisor (helping the client solve his or her own problem)?; (c) what is the consultant's role when members of the client organization are at odds or in disagreement?

Yet the need is readily apparent to each of us whenever we contemplate our own experiences as buyers of professional services. In working with professionals, I frequently ask them to tell me what they dislike about having to deal, as a client, with other professionals such as doctors, accountants, lawyers, interior designers and, yes, management consultants. The list I am given of how people are treated as clients by these professionals is remarkably similar, regardless of the profession being discussed. Professionals ("those guys"), I am told,

- Are pompous, patronizing, condescending and arrogant
- Don't listen
- Treat me like a job, not a person
- Don't explain what they're doing and why
- Don't like to be asked questions or challenged
- Leave me out of the loop and take over my issue
- Tell me what they think I must do instead of giving me options

- Are more interested in my money than me

- Ignore my feelings and treat the issues as purely technical

- Apply standard solutions and approaches; don't make me feel as if they are customizing to my needs

- Don't act as if they care about me

Test this list against your own experience as a patient or client with professionals. Does it sound familiar? What should be obvious about this list is that many, if not all, of the behaviors reported as missing are the very ones we would use to describe someone as a real professional. Note, however, that none are technical in nature, and all relate, one way or the other, to the provider's attitude toward dealing with the client.

A business school education does little to help students distinguish between the "consultant as expert" (I can solve your problem) and the consultant as helpful advisor (I can facilitate your decision-making process and help you make your decisions). (See David H. Maister, Charles H. Green, Robert M. Galford, The Trusted Advisor, Free Press, 2000)

Successfully conveying an attitude of trying to *help* (as opposed to being *right*) is a prerequisite for all consulting work: without the ability to earn a client's trust, content expertise will not be listened to by clients.

Few consultants report that they have been trained in these human interactive skills. Their entire education in schools and in firms has been about logic, rationality and intellect, and little, if any, experiential learning was provided to them on how to earn trust, win influence and establish relationships. Many do not *want* to engage in the interpersonal, social and emotional activities that being a "trusted advisor" requires. Many consultants consciously avoid anything that smacks of intimacy with their clients and rush to return to the "high ground" of detached, logical analysis where they feel most comfortable.

Further attitude problems, perhaps unconsciously, can be formed from the educational experience itself. In case-study-intensive programs, the student is invited to stand as the "outsider" and form judgments on the solutions to business problems. This can breed an attitude of detachment or disengagement; a view that logical, rational, intellectual analysis is the primary virtue; and that emotions, passions, and interpersonal dynamics are relevant only as subject matter to be studied and likely of secondary importance in consulting unless one is a "behavioral" consultant. At no time does the student receive the message that immersing oneself in the messy human dynamics of a business situation is a requirement to finding constructive solutions.

This problem is accentuated by other social conditioning absorbed in business schools about what business is about and what management involves. In one school of my acquaintance, hardly a single case study was examined without someone saying something like "This company is not in business to make widgets, it's in business to make money," thereby dismissing any need to feel passionately involved in the product, the customers or the employees. For better or for worse, such attitudes will influence the future consultant's view of what is important in his or her profession and inevitably send the wrong signals to clients.

Firm Weaknesses

The socialization that takes place in consulting firms varies immensely. Firms often develop their own cultures of what they think "professionalism" is, and consciously or unconsciously socialize their employees into their specific definition of the term. They use the term constantly in their hiring and in proposals to prospective clients.

These varying definitions of professionalism differ immensely from firm to firm, probably appropriately so. For example, some firms emphasize "implementation" as the key to their professionalism, while others stress that their value is added by providing a "big picture" review. Is one of these strategies more "professional" than the other? Clearly not. It would be wrong to conclude that, for example, one must be involved in implementation or give the big picture to be deemed fully professional. The underlying issue is really one of integrity. Is the firm consistent in what it claims to be and do? Does it deliver on what it claims to provide? In essence, the issue is whether or not the firm has (and lives by) a clear ideology of high standards.

Some firms with a clear ideology, such as McKinsey, go out of their way to indoctrinate new hires into their value system (their way of doing things), which includes concrete positions on the role of the consultant, the appropriate way to work with clients and the attitudes expected of all consultants. Of course, what makes this formal indoctrination "stick" is whether or not the attitudes preached are, in fact, the ones that the young consultant sees modeled every day by the more experienced people in the firm.

Other firms, such as the Boston Consulting Group and Bain, also have a reputation for articulating clear, consistent, firm-wide positions on what they consider the role of a consultant to be (an ideology) and to which all members of the firm are expected to adhere. Naturally, these definitions are not identical firm to firm, but all serve the role of communication and forming a set of attitudes that are *required* by the firm. Whether or not the firm provides formal training or documentation is of lesser importance than the fact that there is a clear role model that all recruits are expected to emulate, and that the culture is strong enough to rein in instances of noncompliance.

However, many firms, particularly those who provide widely varying services to widely different marketplaces, experience a harder time in conveying a clear, unambiguous view of the consultant's role. In addition, many firms do not have a firmwide ideology on this point. For these firms, which are probably in the majority, there is no enforced, common approach to working with clients. Individuals are socialized not through formal indoctrination but informally and randomly by the specific individuals they happen to work with. Little or no attempt is made to formally discuss the consultant's role and the attitudes it requires. As a consequence, the concept of professionalism is left ambiguous and, almost certainly, randomly implemented.

Skills with Clients

The range of skills that an effective consultant who wishes to become "fully professional" must develop is, in fact, a long list. While many firms train their people in such things as presentations, written communications, proposal writing and selling, a much smaller percentage actually teach their people about how to work with a client. Client service training, where it exists, is spotty and usually an afterthought. Almost none of it is taught in business schools.

Again, there are singular exceptions. Not surprisingly, McKinsey, with its reputation for making a heavy investment in training, is one of the shining examples. Formal programs of "influence skills" are available and required, taught by psychologists, and there is a common practice of reinforcing this learning by inviting a second or third consultant to sit in on client meetings to observe and debrief the interactions. Such activities take place in other firms, but few have such an organized approach that is clearly signaled and is mandatory for skill development, rather than one that is optional and idiosyncratic.

Other skills are required as a consultant develops. Paul Glen, in his book *Leading Geeks* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) lists, among others, the following competencies needed by an IT professional:

- Ability to manage client relationships
- Ability to manage technical teams
- Ability to play positive politics
- Ability to help expand client relationships
- Ability to work through others and make them productive
- Ability to manage ambiguity
- Ability to manage time horizons
- Ability to manage client relationships

To this fairly familiar list one could add a number of skills that most consultants wish they had mastered earlier in their careers:

- How to earn other people's trust and confidence
- How to earn, deserve and thereby nurture a relationship with a client
- How to give advice without being assertive or patronizing
- How to deal with conflicts among client personnel
- How to manage meetings
- How to supervise others so they want to work for you again
- How to get the best out of those in support or administrative roles
- How to get someone in a more senior role to want to help you
- How to receive work delegated to you so you know what you're supposed to be doing

- If, when and how to say "no" to a senior person or client

- Getting feedback from others, inside and outside, in a timely form you can use

All of these are learnable skills (some are even teachable), and all are components of what I mean by the term "a fully skilled professional." Some of these are commonly contained in the typical firm's training program; a remarkable number of these skills are not.

Integrity at the Core

Integrity is usually taken to be central to the idea of professionalism. But what, precisely, does integrity mean? Consider the following list of statements, each taken from the mission or values statement of a real consulting firm:

- We always put the clients' interests first, ahead of our own.

- If a client wants to pay us to do things that we think aren't in his or her best interest, we'll turn the work down.

- If we have even the smallest doubt that we can't do this work to excellence, we'll turn the work away.

- We never lie, misrepresent or exaggerate, in any way, to anyone, under any circumstances.

- We stand by our work. If clients don't like our work, we refuse to take their money.

- If a client treats our people badly, or with a lack of respect, we'll walk away from that client.

- We will fire any employee who fails to treat others (at any level) with respect and dignity.

How many firms do you know that could meet all these standards? If you think the standards are too tough to be realistic, how would you change them? Do you think a firm that lived by these rules would flourish financially or die? What else do you think belongs on the integrity rules list? Every firm (and individual consultant) should reflect on the above questions.

The key point is that integrity cannot be judged by what you advocate, only by that which you always do. A claim to integrity is only meaningful if it includes this follow-up statement:

"We treat our espoused values as nonnegotiable minimum standards, and counsel anyone who is not in compliance with them. If, after counseling, the person does not, or cannot, get into compliance with our values, we will help them find alternative employment."

One of the readers of my website, where I first posted this statement, responded as follows:

"No firm meets all these tests. Putting the clients' interests first, ahead of our own, is difficult to rationalize in public corporations. The commonly held guideline for behavior (maximize shareholder value) inevitably leads to a violation of the spirit of this principle. Leaders are willing to deceive (if not outright lie) to anyone producing a "drag coefficient" on revenue, including customers. Can (should) this change? I don't think that adherence to strict integrity rules would actively constrain a firm's performance. However, the traits that lead to violations may lead to disadvantages down the road, e.g., lying can work in the short term, but not the long term."

Another reader of my website posed the following question:

"Do you think many professional firms are compromising their integrity in favor of money? The more competitive their environment and the larger their firm, it seems the pressure to maintain or increase revenue is just too great. Are professionals in such firms just high-paid technicians if the driving force from the firm is to make money even if this means risking its reputation?"

As these cynical comments show, there clearly are those firms out there that send a clear message to their people: "It's about the money, stupid: do whatever it takes." I have experienced first-hand those consulting clients who create such pressure to meet short-term financial goals that their people are led into faking orders, padding bills, neglecting client service and beating their staff to a pulp. In fact, if you read the gossipy bulletin boards on the Internet about consulting firms, you can easily conclude that such behavior is more common than not.

Integrity Pays Off

It is difficult to prove with hard science, but my 20 years of watching consulting firms leads me to believe that in consulting you can't get away with a lack of integrity or ethics for long. I'd risk the generalization that those consulting firms that have, over the years, vigorously enforced values, standards and principles will also have achieved the best brand names and the highest profits.

In my book *Practice What You Preach* (Free Press, 2001) I surveyed 5,500 people in 139 professional firm offices in 13 countries, posing 74 culture questions, as well as obtaining three years' worth of financial performance data. Using both stepwise regression and structural equation modeling (path analysis) I discovered that the answers to only *nine* questions accounted for more than 50 percent of all financial performance differences between and among these 139 businesses. They were

1. Client satisfaction is a top priority at our company.

2. We have no room for those who put their personal agenda ahead of the interests of the clients or the office.

3. Those who contribute the most to the overall success of the office are the most highly rewarded.

4. Management gets the best work out of everybody in the office.

5. Around here you are required, not just encouraged, to learn and develop new skills.

6. We invest a significant amount of time in things that will pay off in the future.

7. People within our office always treat others with respect.

8. The quality of supervision of client projects is uniformly high.

9. The quality of the professionals in our office is as high as can be expected.

The firms that succeeded financially were not those that preached these standards (nearly every firm does) but those whose staff, top to bottom, agreed that they were the principles on which their firm actually operated. What's notable about this list is how familiar it is. All it says is that the firms making the most money are those who are actually living up to familiar standards that everyone preaches. The message is that you can make more money when you behave and enforce standards, not when you superficially advocate them or merely post them on a bulletin board or company website.

Whether or not a consulting firm actually has the necessary standards of professionalism is proven by whether or not there are consequences for noncompliance. If a firm has a partner who does not treat others with respect, that partner must be counseled, and if the counseling doesn't work, then that partner must be fired. If the firm is prepared to go that far, it can, in my opinion, be called truly professional and will likely make more money.

Origins of Failure

If all this evidence is valid, why then is excessively risky short-term behavior reported to be so common in business in general and is even found in many consulting firms? Why do we keep hearing of managers "forcing" their people into behaviors that at kindest can be described as "cutting corners" and at worst as unethical?

The most important point to make is that you don't have to be unethical to be dumb. As my questioner put it, consulting firms are doing things to make short-term profits that put their reputations at risk. That's not necessarily a lack of integrity, it's just stupidity. And, at some level, it's even understandable stupidity. A slightly compromised reputation might hurt you tomorrow, or the day after that, but, hey, that's the future, and you wouldn't believe the discount rate we apply to profits in the future compared to today! (And we'll have a year or two to make up for it, won't we? And maybe the clients will forget that we weren't that great two years ago!) Call this the *short-termism* excuse.

There are others too. I have sat in strategy meetings where firm leaders acknowledge the future cost of compromising reputation, but argue that by the time it hurts the firm they will have made their pile and cashed out. These people aren't really short-termers; they're just *selfish* and *greedy*.

Then there are consulting firm leaders who don't really believe their own mission statements, vision, values and strategy. They say that they believe a reputation for excellence is worth its weight in gold, but they are not willing to actually put the proposition to the test. For example, how many firms that preach dedication to outstanding client service are also willing to give an unconditional client satisfaction guarantee? Not many! These people are not being excessively short-term thinkers: they are cynics and unbelievers. They don't really think that building or sustaining a reputation is worth sacrificing any amount of short-term cash.

Another pathology that occurs among a firm's leaders who are not short-term thinkers, are not greedy and are not cynical is that they are very scared and lack courage. They would really like to stick with the firm's strategy and standards and not accept a short-term hit, but they are frightened to take such a risk, either because they think their partners will rise up and revolt, which is actually quite possible, or, if they are publicly held, that Wall Street will take out a substantial chunk of their market value.

A final group of consulting firms with low standards engages in short-term compromises and acts of expediency because they actually don't have ambition. To accept a short-term adverse consequence, you've got to have a passionately held ambition to get somewhere. Otherwise, why would you make sacrifices? Yet many firm leaders are more concerned about not messing up than they are about "going for the gold."

So what have you got to have as a person to "do the right thing?" You have to have integrity, *and* really believe in your strategy, mission and values, *and* have a dream, fervently desired, *and* have the patience and courage to bet on the long term, *and* resist palpable pressure from the constituencies you serve *and* be willing to accept the short-term consequences of your actions. This all takes a level of self-discipline that few of us measure up to in our everyday behavior. I guess that's why it's not common. And I guess that's why they call it professionalism.

Problems of Enforcement

If you really want to obtain the commercial benefits from any strategy, you must put in a system that forces you to execute that strategy. The tragedy of many consulting firms, and the source of their lack of professionalism, is that they have not put in place systems to enforce accountability for standards.

As an example of one that has, consider EDS, the computer services giant. They have a Web-based project management system that records everything about the project—when are the next due dates, what have we done, what's on time, what's delayed, how much of the budget has been spent and accumulated? Here is the key point: this information is entirely accessible to the client! At any time, the client can log in and see where his or her project stands, with budget, due dates, deliveries, etc. EDS asks its clients to log in every two weeks to indicate on a simple scale of one to four their level of satisfaction with the client project so far. The chairman of this multibillion-dollar company logs in every day and can see client feedback from every client for the entire company, and that is the first thing he does every day.

What's impressive about EDS is not the technology but the willingness to be held inescapably accountable to high standards. Many consulting firms haven't even got a decent internal project management system, let alone one that they would give clients access to. Most firms have a mission statement that declares a commitment to client satisfaction and client service. But how many have a feedback system where they regularly ask clients, at the end of every transaction, how happy they are with the work? Only a few! How many publish those results with the names of the relevant partner to everybody in the firm? Even fewer! Instead, what exists in most firms is a frequently espoused belief that client service is very important, but a refusal to establish behaviors to accept accountability for it.

Firms typically leave it up to the individual and his or her self-discipline to accomplish high standards of professionalism, but that usually doesn't do the job. If there is no system that keeps people honest about performing up to standard, you don't get the benefits. The key, if you really want to make something happen, is to not leave it to self-discipline. If you really want to make something happen, create an external discipline. And if you don't want to try that hard, and if you don't want to be held strictly accountable, then fine, move on to something else. But if you can't find anything you're prepared to actually commit to, then recognize that you're probably never going to be anything other than no worse than anybody else.

The Upside

Imagine a world where every junior member of the firm says, "In this firm, one thing you can bank on is that you will be superbly supervised on every transaction. It is a matter of professional principle with us. We don't do work unless we supervise it superbly" (note that this was one of the nine profit predictors in my statistical study). What commercial benefits would come to that consulting firm if it were true that supervision was always done superbly?

First, from the firm's point of view, there would be less wasted time and rework, and the firm would experience lower write-offs and higher realization. You could obtain better economic leverage because people would feel more confident in delegating work to trained people. Second, the firm would spread skills faster and the firm would do a better job of retaining people.

Clients would notice a higher level of quality and therefore might feel less fee sensitive, knowing that they had found someone who always supervised the work well. This is terribly scary, because maybe that might mean they would also notice when the work was not supervised superbly.

If, as a senior partner, I knew that every junior consultant had been supervised superbly since the day they joined the firm, I might actually trust these young people and delegate more to them; whereas if I am living in a normal consulting firm where excellence in supervision happens only sporadically then it's quite logical never to delegate because the juniors are untrained, unguided missiles.

This list of benefits for both firms and clients can be obtained by diligent, enforced adherence to a high standard of project supervision. But here is the issue: Why are many consulting firms not getting these benefits despite everything they promise to new recruits about the importance of quality, professional pride and great work environments? Why does the average consulting firm not enforce this standard? Because they can get away without doing it!

Many consulting firms fail to meet the high standards of professionalism not because they do not believe in them and advocate them, but because they fail to enforce them. It's not an issue of being "unprofessional" or unethical. It's simply a matter of the difference between the true pursuit of excellence and the acceptance of mere competence. They have wonderful standards of quality that are preached. But they will forgive any partner who does not do this, as long as he does not go to the opposite extreme and do something ugly—sexual harassment or get us sued. Competence ("don't mess up") is not the same as professionalism ("uncompromisingly high standards").

Partners' Failed Leadership

If you go to the typical consulting firm today and ask, "What percentage of your partners would put hand-on-heart to say that they regularly read every issue of their main client's trade magazine? Not all your clients—just your main client?" I can report from experience that, around the world, the answer is sadly in the single digits. Yet we all know that clients like for their consultants to show an interest in their business. So let me ask again: "Do you act as if you care about your clients?" In the typical consulting firm, the honest answer is, "We believe that we should care, but we frequently don't act that way."

I often talk about meeting three kinds of partners in consulting firms: *dynamos, cruisers and losers*. These, by the way, are not different people; they are all of us at different stages in our lives. A *dynamo* is somebody who is always acting like they have a career. In addition to taking care of this year, every year they are doing something to bring about their personal future. Every year they're always saying, "Where do I want to go next, and what do I do today to make that happen?"

The *cruisers* (by definition, not *losers*) are a very important category that includes the majority of partners. They are good, solid citizens, coming in each week to make the sausages. They come in next month and they make the sausages. They come in next year and they make the sausages. And everybody knows those sausages are fabulous. The quality is there. The hard work is there, but that person isn't actually going anywhere. He's acting like he's got a job, but if you said, "Where do you want to go next with your career? What kind of transactions do you want to be doing three years from now?" he'd say, "Sausages!" He has no particular desire to advance his professional career.

At some stage in your life, you're probably a *loser*. The usual reasons: divorce, alcoholism, cocaine, manic depression, the kids have been arrested again. Things happen. If you're lucky you deal with it and recover; if you're unlucky you get stuck.

In the typical consulting firm, I am told by firms around the world, the percentage of partners in those three categories is about 15 percent *dynamos*, 75 percent *cruisers* and 10 percent *losers*. If that's the makeup of the typical partnership in the typical consulting firm, only 15 percent of the partners are trying to get somewhere and the large majority is just coasting along while making sausages day after day. Is that professionalism?

If my estimate is accurate, firms should not waste their time doing strategic planning. Because strategic planning in that environment is like trying to figure out which way to point the thundering herd when the herd isn't thundering. The issue is not direction or strategy. The issue is, "Do they or do they not have the appetite to go somewhere, and to accomplish it with high standards of professionalism?"

We therefore come to the key choice if you're considering a firm to join as a partner: which gang do you want to belong to? The tolerant firm says, "If you want to cruise, that's okay. Not only is it acceptable, it's actually the overwhelming norm here," just like in many consulting firms. Or you might want to join a firm where they say, "The rule here is you've got to be learning and growing, because otherwise you're not meeting your requirements as a partner. It's something we have a right to expect of each other, that we are all continually learning and growing." Notice that there's an option here for firm leaders to confront and decide. The choice is, do you want to set forth and enforce a high standard in your partnership agreement?

The Real Bottom Line

The lessons should be clear. You get the benefit of that which you actually do, not that which you encourage. Ultimately, professionalism goes beyond attitudes, knowledge and skills and is about dependable, reliable, consistent behavior. You may believe in something, know how to do it and be skilled at doing it. But unless you can be relied upon to actually do it, and do it unfailingly, then you cannot hope to develop a reputation for professionalism.

The way you make money in consulting is not to be good at managing the money. The way you get money is to decide which product you want to deliver—quick, hot fast food or fabulous cooking for some cuisine connoisseur—and then enforce the standards appropriately for that choice though superb leadership. The money is an outcome of how high your standards are and what you do about them. He or she who lives to the highest standards—in other words, is most professional—wins.

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