

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, January 5, 2001

Helping hands

Here's how to work with a consultant, and what to expect

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question:

In reading your columns, I've noticed that you work for a consulting firm in Brookfield. We haven't used consultants very much. That isn't to say we're anti-consultants, just that we haven't had the need to use them. But I'm just skeptical about consultants because there are so many of them around. I've got a couple of questions that I'd like to see you respond to. How do you get started working with a new client? What are the reasons why a client asks you for help? How do you evaluate your work in solving the problem that clients hire you to fix?

Answer:

During the second-half of the 20th century, a new organizational role, the consultant, began to emerge. As specialized problem-solvers and advisors, consultants were increasingly asked to help managers address barriers to organizational performance. The creation of formal academic programs in organizational behavior and development was a direct outgrowth of the evolving demand for consultants. Over the last 30 years or so, the role of consultant has become increasingly specialized, evolving into such niches as industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologist.

Before I get too far, it occurs to me that you and other readers may be wondering just what is consultation, anyway? The following general definition captures the essence of consultation, regardless of

the specific discipline that may be applied: "A broad helping approach in which qualified professionals help clients resolve work-related issues pertaining to individuals or programs, become active agents in achieving solutions to problems, or strengthen the client's work-related capabilities in order that they may address similar issues in the future."

Generally speaking, the following stages typify a consultative process:

Preliminary contact

Consultation most often begins when a client requests help with a work-related problem. In my consulting practice, that varies from a performance problem with an individual employee to the need for an organization-wide management development program. At the preliminary stage, the emphasis is on data gathering to determine the fit between the consultant and the client. Review of materials, telephone calls, written correspondence, in-person meetings, and the provision of formal proposals or contracts are common.

Entry

In this stage, the consultant begins work on the project outlined during the preliminary stage. There are a host of practical concerns to be addressed as a project gets under way including where the consultant will work, the degree of access they will have within the organization, and the scheduling of visits (a consultant's visit can be disruptive to daily routines so care must be taken to be minimally invasive). Additionally, in this early stage it is important to build trust and rapport by attending to language and social considerations, candor, and communication processes.

Assessment/diagnosis

This is a very important stage because it is the place where problem identification and evaluation takes place. Effective consultation is based on keen analysis of the client's situation. That means defining the problem and verifying its significance. Objective measurement procedures are often used. These are normally some combination of direct (e.g., product inspection, observation) or indirect (e.g., surveys, questionnaires) approaches.

Goal setting

The results of the assessment stage lead to a specific problem statement (i.e., a description of the consultant's understanding of the client's needs). Goal setting addresses the problem statement by deter-

mining the target and anticipated outcomes. Effective goal setting is a collaborative process between consultant and client. Realistic, specific, measurable goals should be established.

Intervention

The interventions that are available will vary from consultant to consultant depending upon their specific area of expertise. In the area of organizational development (OD), which is the application of behavioral science to organizational problems, the kinds of interventions that are possible include training, team-building, conflict-resolution, process consultation, organizational analysis, strategic planning and organizational restructuring.

Evaluation

Evaluation is in some ways the most important stage of a consultation because it is at this time that the effectiveness of the intervention is determined. Evaluation can take many forms depending upon the kind of intervention that has been offered. Generally speaking, however, evaluation takes two forms, formative and/or summative. Formative evaluation targets the consultant's decisions, actions, plans and organizational strategies as they unfold. Summative evaluation targets specific consultative outcomes, including goal attainment, client reactions, cost justification, and changes in individual or organizational performance.

Termination

The termination stage focuses on ending the consultation. By the way, not every consultant sees a client as a retirement annuity. Effective consultants know that their primary role is to help the clients help themselves. That means, of course, that effective consultants work themselves out of a job. Issues that are typically addressed in this stage include planning for the intervention to continue in the consultant's absence. That means clarifying roles and responsibilities, implementing an internal support system, establishing feedback cycles, strategizing the withdrawal from the consultation by shifting authority to an internal contact and staying in touch (e.g., for continued consultative support, if desired) with the internal contact to ensure the success of the intervention for the future.

Those stages are typical of most consultations with most consultants. Should you engage a consultant, something to remember is that consultants are not miracle workers. They should be used for the right reasons (i.e.,

What to ask a consultant

Want to find a consultant that works for your situation? Here are some questions to ask:

- How much of my time can I devote to this problem?
- What role can I play in solving this problem?
- What resource internal and external options (including people, time and money) are available relative to this problem?
- What role can a consultant play?
- What past experience has the consultant had with this kind of problem?
- Can I speak with the consultant's previous clients who had similar problems?
- What are the consultant's pricing and contracting policies?
- What other issues might impact this situation and what can I do about them?

By asking the right questions up front, you can avoid surprises later on.

specialized assistance with important issues or problems). Remember, also, that you as the client control the consultant, not the other way around. The consultant is there to do what you want done. If they don't understand that, if they want to tell you what to do, etc., then don't use them; engage someone else.

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