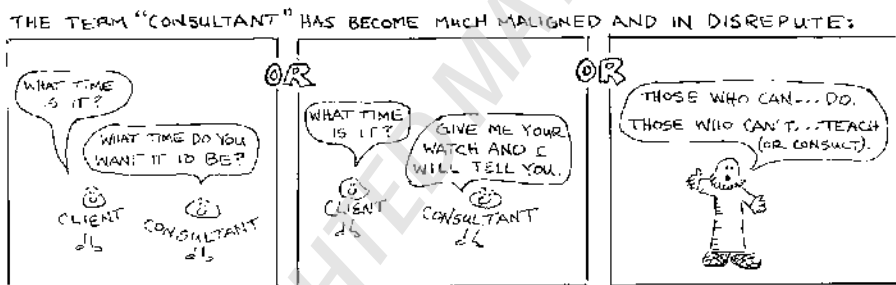# A CONSULTANT BY ANY OTHER NAME . . .

ANY FORM OF HUMOR or sarcasm has some truth in it. The truth in the prevailing skepticism about consultants is that the traditional consultant has tended to act solely as an agent of management: assuming the manager's role in either performing highly technical activities that a manager cannot do or performing distasteful and boring activities that a manager does not want to do. The most dramatic examples of consultants' taking the place of managers is when they identify people who will be let go or functions that will be eliminated.

When you are asked directions and you tell someone to get off the bus two stops before you do, you are acting as a consultant. Every time you give advice to someone who is faced with a choice, you are consulting. When you don't have direct control over people and

yet want them to listen to you and heed your advice, you are face-to-face with the consultant's dilemma. For some of you, this may be your full-time predicament. Some of you may face it only occasionally, functioning part time as managers (having direct control) and part time as consultants (wanting to influence but lacking authority to control).

SOME DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

A *consultant* is a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. A *manager* is someone who has direct responsibility over the action. The moment you take direct responsibility, you are acting as a manager.

Most people in staff or support roles in organizations are really consultants, even if they don't officially call themselves consultants. Support people function in any organization by planning, recommending, assisting, or advising in such matters as these:

- Human resources or personnel

- Financial analysis

- Auditing

- Systems analysis

- Market research

- Product design

- Long-range planning

- Organizational effectiveness

- Safety

- Training and development

- And many more

The recipients of all this advice are called *clients.* Sometimes the client is a single individual. Other times, the client may be a work group, a department, or a whole organization. The client is the person or persons whom the consultant wants to influence.*

In organizations, clients for the services provided by support people are called *line managers.* Line managers have to labor under the advice of support groups, whether they like it or not. But by definition, any support function has no direct authority over anything but its own time, its own internal staff, and the nature of the service it offers. This tension between the line manager (or client) who has direct control and the support person (or consultant) who does not have direct control is one of the central themes of this book.

The key to understanding the consultant role is to see the difference between a consultant and a manager.

Listen to Alfred:

> It was a great four-month project. I headed the team from administrative services that installed the new management information system. We assessed the problems, designed the system, and got Alice, the line manager, to let us install the system from top to bottom.

Alfred is clearly very satisfied—but this is the line manager's satisfaction. He wasn't really acting as a consultant; he took over a piece of the line manager's job for four months.

This distinction is important. A consultant needs to function differently from a line manager—for the consultant's own sake and for the learning goals of the client. It's okay to have direct control—and most of us want it in various forms of disguise. It is essential, though, to be aware of the difference in the roles we are assuming when we have it and when we don't.

* You will mainly see the terms *consultant* and *client* used throughout the rest of this book to reinforce this belief and—especially if you are in a staff or support role— assist your thinking of yourself as a consultant.
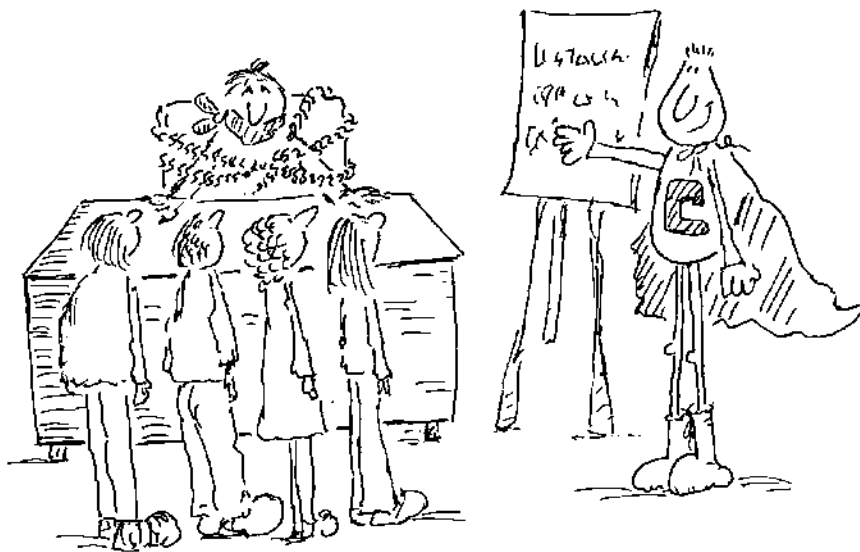
Much of the disfavor associated with the term *consultant* comes from the actions of people who call themselves consultants but act as surrogate line managers. When you act on behalf of or in the place of the manager, you are acting as a surrogate manager. When the client says, "Complete this report for me," "Hire this person for me," "Design this system for me," "Counsel this employee," or "Figure out which jobs stay and which jobs go," the manager is asking for a surrogate. The attraction of the surrogate manager role is that at least for that one moment, you assume the manager's power—but in fact you are doing the manager's job, not yours.

Your goal or end product in any consulting activity is some kind of change. Change comes in two varieties. At one level, we consult to create change in the line organization of a structural, policy, or procedural nature—for example, a new compensation package, a new reporting process, or a new safety program. The second kind of change is the end result that one person or many people in the line organization have learned something new. They may have learned what norms dominate their staff meetings, what they do to keep lower-level people in a highly dependent position in decision making, how to involve people more directly in setting goals, or how to conduct better performance evaluations.

In its most general use, *consultation* describes any action you take with a system of which you are not a part. An interview with someone asking for help is a consulting act. A survey of problems, a training program, an evaluation, a study—all are consultations for the sake of change. The consultant's objective is to engage in successful actions that result in people or organizations managing themselves differently.

I think of the terms *staff* or *support work* and *consulting work* as being interchangeable, reflecting my belief that people in a support role need consulting skills to be effective—regardless of their field of technical expertise (finance, planning, engineering, personnel, systems, law). Every time you give advice to someone who is in the position to make the choice, you are consulting. For each of these moments of consultation, there are three kinds of skills you need to do a good job: technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills.

Here are the distinctions.

Technical Skills

Above all, we need to know what the person is talking about. We need expertise about the question. Either in college or in our first job, we were trained in a specific field or function. This might be engineering, sales, accounting, counseling, or any of the thousands of other ways people make a living. This is our basic training. It is only later, after acquiring some technical expertise, that we start consulting. If we didn't have some expertise, then people wouldn't ask for our advice. The foundation for consulting skills is some expertise—whether it is scientific, such as coke particle sizing, or nonscientific, such as management or organizational development. This book assumes you have some area of expertise.

Interpersonal Skills

To function with people, we need to have some interpersonal skills, that is, some ability to put ideas into words, to listen, to give support, to disagree reasonably, to basically maintain a relationship. There are many books and seminars available to help people with these skills.

In fact, there is a whole industry about achieving better relationships that is devoted to improving these skills. Just like technical skills, interpersonal skills are necessary to effective consultation.

Consulting Skills

Each consulting project, whether it lasts ten minutes or ten months, goes through five phases. The steps in each phase are sequential; if you skip one or assume it has been taken care of, you are headed for trouble. Skillful consulting is being competent in the execution of each of these steps. Successfully completing the business of each phase is the primary focus of this book.

CONSULTING SKILLS PREVIEW

Here is an overview of what is involved in the five phases of consulting.

Phase 1: Entry and Contracting

This phase has to do with the initial contact with a client about the project. It includes setting up the first meeting as well as exploring the problem, whether the consultant is the right person to work on this issue, what the client's expectations are, what the consultant's expectations are, and how to get started. When consultants talk about their disasters, their conclusion is usually that the project was faulty in the initial contracting stage.
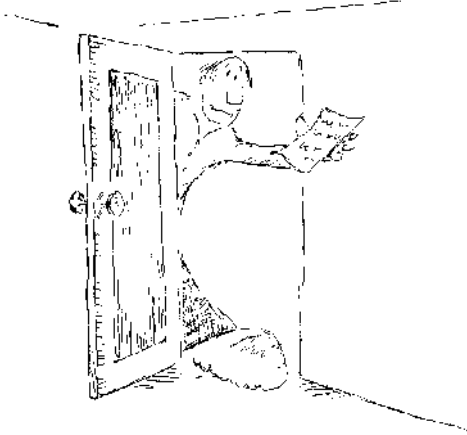
Phase 2: Discovery and Dialogue

Consultants need to come up with their own sense of both the problem and the strengths the client has. This may be the most useful thing they do. They also need skill in helping the client do the same. The

questions here for the consultant are: Who is going to be involved in defining the problem or situation? What methods will be used? What kind of data should be collected? How long will it take? Should the inquiry be done by the consultant, or should it be done by the client?

Phase 3: Analysis and the Decision to Act

The inquiry and dialogue must be organized and reported in some fashion. The consultant is always in the position of reducing large amounts of data to a manageable number of issues. There are also choices for the consultant to make on how to involve the client in the process of analyzing the information. In giving feedback to an organization, there is always some resistance to the data (if it deals with important issues). The consultant must handle this resistance before an appropriate decision can be made about how to proceed. This phase is really what many people call planning. It includes setting ultimate goals for the project and selecting the best action steps or changes.

Phase 4: Engagement and Implementation

This involves carrying out the planning of phase 3. In many cases, the implementation may fall entirely on the line organization. For larger change efforts, the consultant may be deeply involved. Some projects start implementation with an educational event. This could be a series of meetings to introduce some change, a single meeting to get different parts of the organization together to address a problem, or a training session. In these cases, the consultant is usually involved in rather complicated design work and in running the meeting or training session.

Phase 5: Extension, Recycle, or Termination

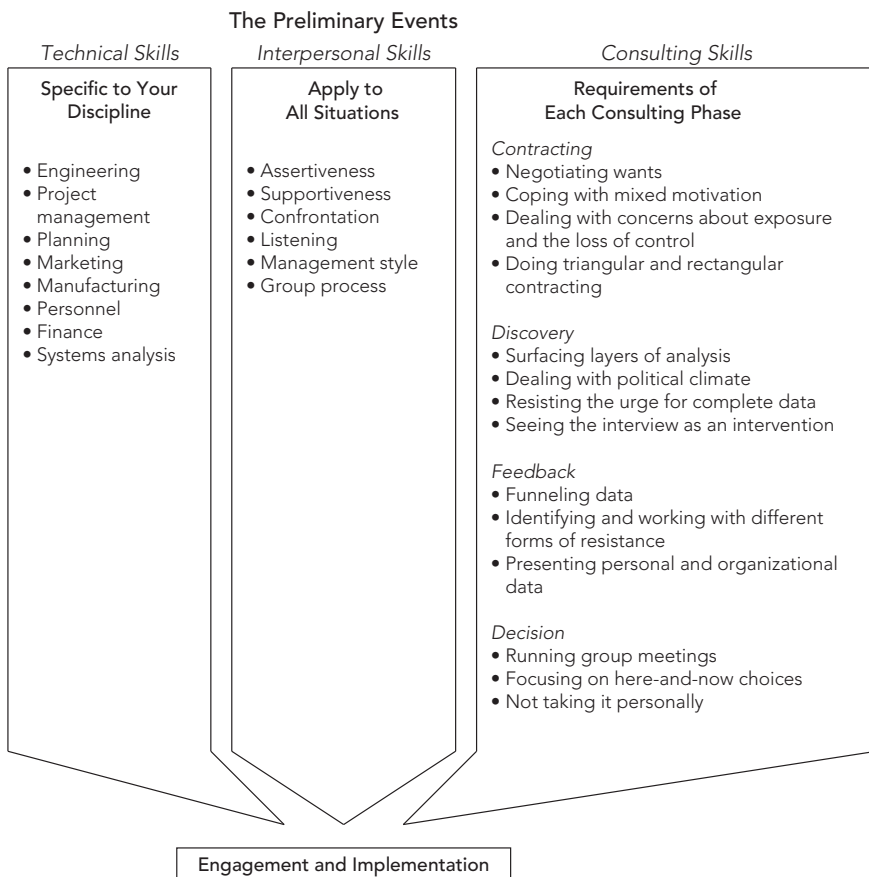Phase 5 is about learning from the engagement. Following this is the decision whether to extend the process to a larger segment of the organization. Sometimes it is not until after some implementation occurs that a clear picture of the real problem emerges. In this case, the process recycles and a new contract needs to be discussed. If the implementation was either a huge success or a moderate-to-high

failure, termination of further involvement on this project may be in the offing. There are many options for ending the relationship, and termination should be considered a legitimate and important part of the consultation. If done well, it can provide an important learning experience for the client and the consultant and also keep the door open for future work with the organization.

■ ■

When you look at Figure 1, you will see a preview of some of the skills and topics covered for the preliminary events leading to engagement and implementation. Consulting skills are grouped into four phases:

Figure 1. An Overview of Consulting Skills

The Preliminary Events

Technical Skills	*Interpersonal Skills*	*Consulting Skills*
Specific to Your Discipline	Apply to All Situations	Requirements of Each Consulting Phase
• Engineering • Project management • Planning • Marketing • Manufacturing • Personnel • Finance • Systems analysis	• Assertiveness • Supportiveness • Confrontation • Listening • Management style • Group process	*Contracting* • Negotiating wants • Coping with mixed motivation • Dealing with concerns about exposure and the loss of control • Doing triangular and rectangular contracting *Discovery* • Surfacing layers of analysis • Dealing with political climate • Resisting the urge for complete data • Seeing the interview as an intervention *Feedback* • Funneling data • Identifying and working with different forms of resistance • Presenting personal and organizational data *Decision* • Running group meetings • Focusing on here-and-now choices • Not taking it personally

Engagement and Implementation

contracting, discovery, feedback, and decision. They include the initial contacts, the planning meetings, the inquiry and analysis, and the feedback and decision-making meetings.

Engagement/implementation is when you finally do something with enough impact to be noticeable to many people in the organization, and they have the expectation that change, or learning, will occur because of that event. One of my beliefs is that the preliminary events are in many ways more crucial for success than the engagement. An understanding of consulting skills therefore is really an understanding of preliminary events.

THE PROMISE OF FLAWLESS CONSULTATION

One reason consulting can be frustrating is that you are continually managing lateral relationships. As a support person or consultant, you are working with a line manager in a context in which there is no clear boss-subordinate relationship between you. Vertical relationships are easier to understand. If your boss gives you an order, you know that he or she has the right to tell you what to do. But if your client makes a demand, you don't necessarily have to obey. The power balance in lateral relationships is always open to ambiguity—and to negotiation. When we get resistance from a client, sometimes we aren't sure whether to push harder or let go. This book is about managing this ambiguity.

Taken as a whole, this book is about flawless consultation—consulting without error. It concentrates on the preliminary events because I believe competence in contracting, discovery, and feedback creates the

foundation for successful outcomes in the implementation stage. I have deliberately avoided discussing and demonstrating consulting skills in an overall step-wise sequence of chapters because some concepts and competencies must be brought to bear in every stage of a consulting relationship. So I have included chapters treating consulting assumptions, goals for a consulting relationship, and consultant role choices, as well as what flawless consultation means in practice, along with the chapters that specify and illustrate the skills required for each of the preliminary events. I have also interspersed chapters on such issues as client resistance and the special considerations of the internal consultant's role to demonstrate the belief that successful consulting demands more than a methodical, step-by-step application of technical expertise.

The promise is that if you consult in the way this book describes, your consultation can be flawless and you will

- Have your expertise better used

- Have your recommendations more frequently implemented

- Work in more of a partnership role with clients

- Avoid no-win consulting situations

- Develop internal commitment in your clients

- Receive support from your clients

- Increase the leverage you have with clients

- Establish more trusting relationships with clients

My use of the term *flawless consulting* may sound presumptuous, but it is not accidental. A basic value underlying this book is that there is in each of us the possibility of perfection. There is a consulting professional inside each of us, and our task is to allow that flawless consultant to emerge. On its surface, this book is about methods and techniques. But each technique carries a consistent message more important than any method: that each act that expresses trust in ourselves and belief in the validity of our own experience is always the right path to follow. Each act that is manipulative or filled with pretense is always self-destructive.

Working in organizations means we are constantly bombarded by pressure to be clever and indirect and to ignore what we are feeling at the moment. Flawless consulting offers the possibility of letting our behavior be consistent with our beliefs and feelings and also to be successful in working with our clients. The focus in this book on techniques and skills in consulting is simply a way to identify the high self-trust choices we all have as we work in organizations. From the first day on our first job, each of us has struggled with the conflict between being ourselves and conforming to the expectations we think our employers or clients have of us. The desire to be successful can lead us into playing roles and adopting behaviors that are internally alien and represent some loss of ourselves.

Consultants are especially vulnerable to this conflict because we are supposed to be serving our clients' needs. Our projects also tend to be short term, and we work at the pleasure of the client. It is easier to terminate a consultant or support person than to terminate a subordinate. In hard times, managers end consulting projects before they reduce their own workforce. This sense of vulnerability can become a rationalization for consultants to deny their own needs and feelings and to not be authentic.

This book offers an alternative. It says that trusting ourselves is the path that serves us well with clients and increases the chances that our expertise will be used again and again.