

1 Chapter

If It Walks Like a Duck

What Constitutes an Effective Internal Consultant?

THE ROLE OF A CONSULTANT

I'm going to be talking about consultants. It doesn't matter what your title is. The topic includes human resources professionals, trainers, facilitators, change agents, and whatever else may be on your business card.

A consultant is someone who provides expertise for a client for a particular issue, concern, opportunity, or problem. That expertise may include knowledge, experiences, processes, models, behaviors, technology, or other assets. An external and internal consultant both provide this expertise in return for remuneration for the value provided. For an external consultant, that remuneration is usually a fee. For an internal consultant, that remuneration is usually a job (and the continuance thereof).

The consultant has a basic, overarching role, which guides all subordinate roles: That role is to improve the client's condition.

Just as the doctors say, "First, do no harm," the consultant is only successful if the client is better off after the engagement than before. That improvement may be in the form of a problem fixed, an opportu-

4

IF IT WALKS LIKE A DUCK

nity exploited, a disaster averted, confidence validated, or any number of other salutary results. But if you haven't improved the client's condition, then you haven't been successful.

This means that our roles are those of advisors. We don't do the work, *per se*. When a consultant becomes the temporary (or *de facto*) director of sales, he or she is no longer a consultant but an employee filling a key position. It's up to our client to assess our advice and make appropriate decisions. After all, if the lawyers made the legal decisions, the auditors the financial decisions, and the consultants the management decisions, then why would we need managers?

Consultants are basically advisors to management who must provide objective, pragmatic, and honest advice to their clients. If there is a trusting relationship, then the clients will always be confident that their best interests are being served, no matter how threatening, contrarian, or painful that advice may be.

Consulting is a relationship business. That means we must develop trusting relationships with internal partners and clients. To me, trust means that *both parties have the underlying conviction that the other person has the partner's absolute best interests in mind*. If I believe that about you, then I'm much more likely to listen to unprecedented, painful, and/or counterintuitive advice. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt (as you will extend that to me).

One of the key problems in internal consulting is a lack of trust. We address this as we progress, but we all know that a lack of credibility attached to a department or function also attaches itself to individuals representing that department or function. When that's the case, it's far easier to build individual trust and credibility than it is to change an entire department's reputation. When enough individuals have made the change, the department will benefit. But functions do not change perceptions; people do. Departments don't earn trust; individuals do.

The role of an internal consultant should place an emphasis on anticipation, improvement, and innovation. There has been an inordi-

***Ten Ways to Develop, Nurture,
and/or Recover Trust with Line Partners***

1. Learn their issues and understand the realities of their business objectives.
2. Don't approach with a boxed solution, but listen and customize your response.
3. Overcommunicate, and be proactive in your communications.
4. Seek personal interactions over e-mail and voice messages.
5. Proactively suggest approaches to improve their operation; don't wait for pain.
6. Eschew all jargon; "left brain/right brain" thinkers, or "driver expressives" really don't matter.
7. Use only validated tools and bury the fads. There aren't many people today using "open meetings" or "future search," or any other nonsense that has no valid base.
8. Spend time doing the work. Don't spend a career in HR or training; work in sales, service, information technology (IT), finance, or wherever you can make a contribution and learn the business.
9. Use metrics that demonstrate progress directly related to your intervention.
10. Share credit, but also take credit. Develop a network of supporters, testimonials, and a history of success.

nate concentration on problem solving. While always important, problem solving has become a fairly mechanized routine and therefore of less value, despite its frequency. Problem solving basically restores performance to past levels.

But innovation raises the bar and is of much higher value. Since most managers have their noses pressed tightly to the glass of their own operations, they often fail to see the opportunity surrounding

them. Catching up with the competition is important, but creating a gap between yourself and the next closest competitor is invaluable.

As a rule, internal consultants have been far too reactive and not nearly proactive enough. Figure 1.1 illustrates the difference between problem solving and innovation.

Finally, an important part of the role is to disagree. We're often swept along in the fervor of an executive's bright idea, but no one has had the fortitude to point out that no one is wearing any clothes. Outstanding (and trustworthy) consultants push back. They consider legality, ethics, pragmatics, risks, and costs to other parties. They don't blindly implement.

We have an excellent plumber. He arrives on time, fixes the leaks, and charges according to his efforts. But we would never ask him to come in and discuss the way the kitchen is decorated or the location of the bathrooms.

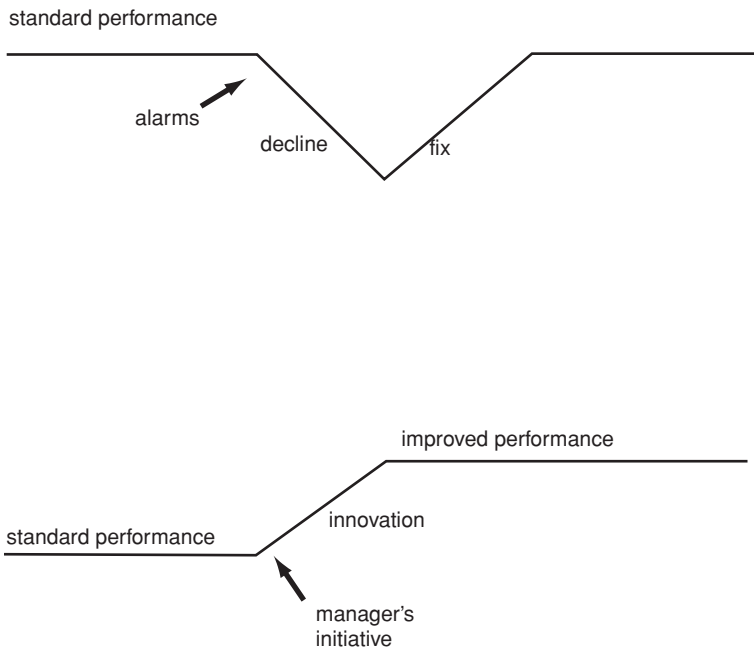


FIGURE 1.1 Problem solving vs. innovation

You must dedicate time to investigate how you can improve the operations of unsuspecting potential clients. Problems call out to you, but opportunity hides around the bend. Help your clients to recognize the bonanza awaiting, and formulate plans to exploit it. Don't be a firefighter—be a prospector.

We need plumbers to fix the leaks. But I don't think anyone reading this sees his or her future mending the corporate pipes.

THE KEY PLAYERS

The most important person in the consultant's universe is the *economic buyer*. The economic buyer is that person who can actually pay for your services. If there's a charge back system, then the economic buyer's budget is the one charged. In any case, he or she is the one whose project is involved.

Other hallmarks of the economic buyer:

- ✓ They specify the results that are required.
- ✓ They can allocate resources.
- ✓ They are the clearly perceived sponsor or champion.
- ✓ They will evaluate results.
- ✓ Their unit or function is the target of the improved condition.
- ✓ They are taking the risk and reaping the rewards.
- ✓ The buck stops there.

The economic buyer, in effect, writes the check. There is not a direct hierarchical corollary. Division managers and department heads are often economic buyers (as are always CEOs, CFOs, etc.), but the critical element is the ability to fund the project without further approval. My key buyer in Merck for years was a man with the title of manager of international development, and in Hewlett-Packard a woman who held the position of director of knowledge management.

Many internal consultants try to avoid the economic buyer. Often

intimidating and usually influential, the economic buyer presents a problem in some cases, especially in an organization setting in which you've each had your roles defined for a long time. You may well have separate colleagues, never attend the same meetings, and even eat lunch in different settings.

The economic buyer is the person with whom you must partner. If you settle for the buyer's subordinates, you likely become an implementer and not a consultant.

No matter. As a consultant, you need to be a partner of the buyer for the project. If you treat the buyer with deference due the position, or imbue him with Gnostic wisdom because of his rank, or refuse to oppose her because of fear of retribution, then you're a sycophant, not a consultant.

Most projects also have *critical sponsors*. These are people whose

Case Study

I was working with Mercedes-Benz North America, and the entire staff was scared to death of the president, a haughty and tough German national. He intimidated the heck out of everyone, and otherwise strong people became obsequious fawners in his presence.

One day he asked if I would do something and I told him I couldn't because it was a bad idea. I explained how the dealers would instantly dislike it, and that it would reflect poorly on him without any commensurate gain.

"You're absolutely right," he quickly concluded, and then added, "Why can't my own people point that out? Not one of them opposed this, and you made it instantly clear that it's a horrid idea. Why do we need to bring in outsiders to tell me the truth?"

Why, indeed?

support can enlist others to the cause but whose opposition—even quietly—can undermine the entire endeavor. A critical sponsor may be:

- ✓ An influential direct report of the buyer.
- ✓ A union officer.
- ✓ A highly successful salesperson.
- ✓ A major customer.
- ✓ An informal, respected leader.

It's important to co-opt the critical sponsors. That means that you and the buyer (hence, one more reason for a trusting partnership there) devise a strategy to convert key sponsors to the cause. This may be an appeal by the buyer, an appeal by you, careful relationship building, the identification of their self-interests, and so on. It may be different for each sponsor. The important thing is to bring them aboard before they scuttle the boat.

Implementers are those people who will have a responsibility for executing the appropriate actions and/or adopting the required behaviors. They may well be resistant, since the present is usually comfortable and the future is problematic. But they must be made situationally uncomfortable, so that maintaining the status quo is not possible.

It's not important that implementers like you; it's simply important that they change in the manner desired. A sales team might not like cross-selling several products when it was accustomed to specializing in a single product, but that's the direction in which they must be driven. The ideal agents for persuading implementers, in order of quality, are:

1. Appeal to enlightened self-interest. Persuade the implementer that he or she is better off by indulging in the new behaviors. For example, demonstrate a higher potential income, or more latitude of action, or greater learning potential.
2. Peer pressure. Develop a sufficient critical mass of converts so that any holdouts seem unenlightened and left in the dust. (The psychologists call this "normative pressure.") If enough people seem happy to make the changes requested, a momentum will be created that will affect the onlookers.

3. Coercion. Make it unbearably painful to continue to resist. The buyer might use the financial pressure inherent in evaluations, incentive compensation, and bonuses; job assignments might be increasingly unpleasant; status may be reduced; there can even be threats about retaining one's position. This is a tactic solely within the purview of the buyer, since the consultant wields no such power.

Move the implementers by whatever means necessary, but *move them*.

Finally, there are *stakeholders* of various types and varying degrees. These are people whose work or results will be impacted by the project. They may be employees, customers, vendors, management, shareholders, and so on. They have some stake in the quality of the outcomes.

Key sponsors will, in turn, greatly influence implementers and stakeholders, so it's a good idea to identify each such sponsor and develop a strategy with the economic buyer as to how to best persuade each one to back your project.

It's a good idea to sample stakeholders early to determine their perceptions of their roles, interests, and impact in terms of the success of the project. It's crazy, for example, to introduce a new incentive system without sampling the sales force or a new pricing policy without talking to customers.

The ideal project will include a partnering relationship with the economic buyer; a strategy that successfully persuades all key sponsors to back you; focused and relatively rapid movement of implementers to execute the plan; and stakeholders who can recognize and support their own improved conditions due to the project.

Having said all that, if you don't have a relationship with the economic buyer, the odds are stacked greatly against you.

THE BASIC DYNAMICS

There are interpersonal and cultural dynamics that occur in virtually every consulting project. Four of these constants are important to master:

1. Resistance to change.
2. Process versus content.
3. The role of culture.
4. We've heard every objection.

1. Resistance to change.

There is a generally accepted myth that holds that people resist change. I've found that to be totally untrue. Every day, people adapt to, adjust for, and anticipate change in the form of roads closed, surprises from their family (good or bad), organizational shifting of priorities, cancellations, abrupt requests, and so on. If people were reluctant to change, we'd all be on heavy medication. Change is the universal norm, and it is both omnipresent and accepted.

What people do resist, however, is ambiguity. Some changes do not involve ambiguity, such as a highway detour that puts one on familiar, though less-traveled streets, or a work shift that involves a sudden trip, but to a site often visited. Other changes produce significant ambiguities: a road detour that takes one to completely unfamiliar territory or a sudden trip to a new country, new client, or new problem.

People do not generally resist change, per se. They do resist venturing into unfamiliar and potentially harmful territory. It's up to the consultant to provide maps, lighting, and warm clothing.

In organizational change work, most people can relate to the picture painted of the future organization, and all people are intimately familiar with where they are today. But the journey to that new future is likely to be highly ambiguous and unclear. William Bridges calls this

The Neutral Zone and I've called it The Ambiguous Zone.¹ The concept is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Work with your client to establish *not only the future state desired, but also the details of the journey*. For example, delineate the details of the transition, the numbers of people affected, what the universe of stakeholders looks like, likely obstacles, and so on. You'll find that the implementers are far more comfortable following a game plan—and even deviating from it, if necessary—than proceeding with no game plan at all.

People don't resist change. They resist being thrust into the unknown. Or, as my son put it once when much younger, "I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm afraid of what might be *in* the dark."

2. Process versus content.

Almost everyone reading this is a *process* consultant. By that I mean that the work you do (in negotiating, facilitating, training, conflict resolution, retention, succession planning, strategy, career development, ad infinitum) is applicable over vast acres of the corporate

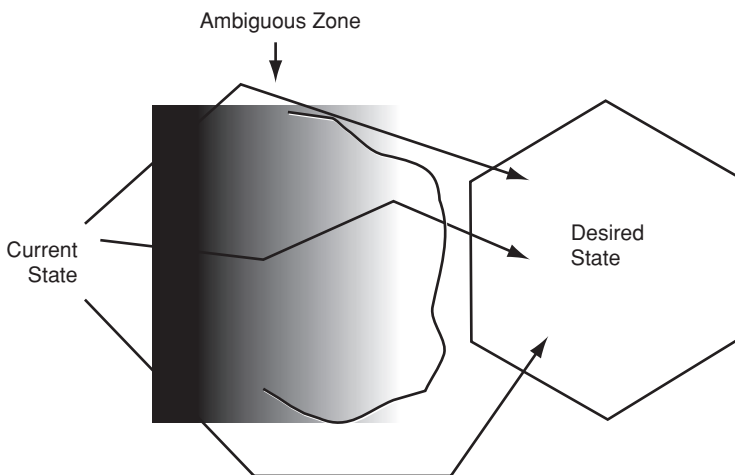


FIGURE 1.2 The Ambiguous Zone position

¹See, for example, William Bridges' *Managing Transitions* (Addison Wesley, 1991) or my *Process Consulting* (Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2002).

Case Study

At one point I was assisting a call center response unit of Hewlett-Packard to switch to sophisticated new technology, with the intended result of reversing the prior ratio of 10 technical assistance calls answered electronically and 90 by a human being. With 90 percent of future calls responded to automatically, vast cost savings and increased customer efficiencies were projected.

However, we had to be careful to specify the steps that would be taken to reassign current staff; for job posting and bidding criteria; to provide skills and development for new assignments; and to specify clear time frames over which the transition would be finalized.

Our most important detail was to explain that the jobs remaining could not be assigned by lottery or seniority, since that final 10 percent of calls that could not be answered automatically would be, by definition, very tough issues requiring very deep knowledge of the systems involved.

This has always represented to me the human side of reengineering, which requires substantial consulting skills, and which can and should be done by internal people wherever possible.

landscape. Just as good external consultants can readily work cross-industrially and cross-culturally, good internal consultants can readily work cross-functionally and cross-culturally.

In other words, “You don’t know our business” is never an applicable phrase!

When the CEO of Merck looked askance when I told him I knew virtually nothing about pharmaceuticals, I reminded him that we were sitting in the midst of more than 15,000 people who knew pharmaceuticals quite well. “Why do you need another pharmaceutical expert?” I asked. “I thought you needed someone to run focus groups on diversity.”

Processes (such as the previous examples) are applicable in any environment with any content. While it's important to be *conversant* in the organization's content, it's not important to be expert in it.

Now here's the beauty of the internal consultant: At least you are living in the environment and, the longer you are there, presumably, the more you do become a content expert in the organization's work, to a greater degree than an outsider like me ever could. But don't be tripped up internally. Just because you've worked primarily for sales doesn't mean you can't work for finance, and merely because you've been working domestically doesn't mean you can't provide your expertise internationally.

Many internal consultants make the mistake of believing that they must become as expert as the people they are trying to help, and that's just crazy. Consultants who work with medical practices can not perform surgery, and jury consultants don't attempt to try cases themselves in court (because they can't). In fact, the very power that you bring is that of someone untainted by the content and able to bring the best practices from a diverse array of internal units and operations. Whatever you do, don't become the content expert for actuarial services, or call center response, or building security.

The more processes you master, and the more agility with which you can apply them, the more potential customers you gain.

3. *The role of culture.*

This is one of the greatest red herrings to land in the boat. If I can change culture from the outside, you can transmogrify it from the inside.

What is culture? I'll give you my quick definition, which has made more than one executive stop short.

Culture is simply that set of beliefs that governs behavior.

That's it. There are civic, organizational, school, neighborhood, family, and all kinds of cultures. Sometimes we move through several in the course of a day, adjusting our behaviors accordingly. (Did you ever hear the refrain, "Watch your tone—you're not at work now!")

My point is not to allow the dreaded cultural gambit to thwart, undo, or sabotage you. "It's just our culture in this department" really means that the current belief system leads to those behaviors, and not that the behaviors are ingrained from the middle of an obscure reptil-

ian brain of 30 million years' development hidden deep in our cerebral cortex. My response is always, "Well, what do you say we change it tomorrow?"

Culture is changed when belief systems change, and belief systems change when *key exemplars establish a different set of beliefs through their behavior*. If you want to change behavior, culture notwithstanding, then change the beliefs of the most visible and respected exemplars.

In organizational life, no one believes what they read or hear. They believe only what they *see*. If you want to change people's behavior, change the exemplars' behavior. To do that, influence their belief systems. And then, *voilà*, the culture has changed!

Don't feel handcuffed by "culture." Cultures change all the time (if you don't believe that, look at Continental Airlines before and after CEO Gordon Bethune), based on the actions of leaders. As a consultant, don't try to change behavior from the ground up. It usually doesn't work. Start at the top. That's why I stressed earlier the need to establish partnering relationships with the economic buyer.

4. *We've heard every objection.*

There is no objection you haven't heard, assuming you've been on the job for longer than 20 minutes. I'm serious. If you hear a new objection from a line customer as to why a project can't proceed, or why he can't support it, or why she can't live up to her original commitments that you haven't heard 100 times before, then you either haven't been listening, or have the memory capacity of a fish.²

It is absolutely negligent to be thrown by an objection from one

²One of my great statistics from psychology: It seems a fish forgets everything it knows every four seconds, which is why the same fish can keep getting caught under the same circumstances. Some consultants have fishlike attention spans. They are continually flummoxed by the same thing that flummoxed them yesterday. That's why they're green around the gills.

of your buyers, implementers, sponsors, or other stakeholders. You should be prepared to deal with the objections *overwhelmingly*.

For example, I'm often asked by a prospect something like this. "We like you, but would it be wise for us to use you when we could be hiring a larger firm with more resources?" My reply is rapid and to the point. "No, not wise at all, because here are 10 reasons why you're better off with me:

1. You're always dealing with the principal.
2. I'm far more responsive.
3. I'm not juggling dozens of clients and hundreds of requests.
4. And so on."³

Here are typical client objections, pre- and post-implementation, which you'd better be able to handle immediately and forcefully. How many are you comfortable spontaneously rebutting?

- ✓ We don't have the time.
- ✓ The operation can't absorb the disruption right now.
- ✓ HR (or whoever) doesn't have credibility with the sales force (or whomever).
- ✓ I can't afford the resource commitment.
- ✓ We don't have the money.
- ✓ The clients will hate it.
- ✓ We tried it before and it didn't work.
- ✓ I won't proceed unless you give me some guarantees.
- ✓ You don't have the expertise to do this internally.
- ✓ In retrospect, I promised too much support and have to withdraw.
- ✓ We need to delay this for a while due to other priorities.

³I also have 10 reasons why a buyer should use me rather than existing internal resources! That means you should be able to quickly rattle off why you're a better alternative than someone like me!

- ✓ Things aren't happening as rapidly as I had hoped.
- ✓ We're experiencing more resistance from our people than I'd anticipated.
- ✓ Let's see how things work out at this stage before moving forward.
- ✓ My priorities have just changed.

Sound familiar? You need a response to every one, and others like them. But that's not difficult, because we've heard them all so many times. For example, take the fourth one. Here are some responses:

- ✓ Why do you think it failed previously?
- ✓ True, but four key conditions have changed.
- ✓ Actually, it worked, but was abandoned in the cost-cutting initiatives.
- ✓ It failed here, but worked for other departments (or the competition). Why do you think that occurred?
- ✓ And so on.

There are three reasons for everything. By that I mean that, psychologically, people tend to remember and be influenced by sets of three, or triads. So when you rebut an objection, have at least three clear and compelling rationales, and number them. That will usually win the day.

Finally, there is the classic "fish for" versus "teach to fish" dynamic, which I would like to elaborate on as shown in Figure 1.3.

From my perspective, the ideal dynamic is a diagonal line toward the upper right. That means that you are maximizing the importance of the issues on which you are working for clients *as well as* maximally transferring skills to the client to address such issues in the future. Again, this is an inherent advantage for the internal consultant. But too many internal people content themselves with far less valuable extremes, such as independent expert, analyst, or trainer.

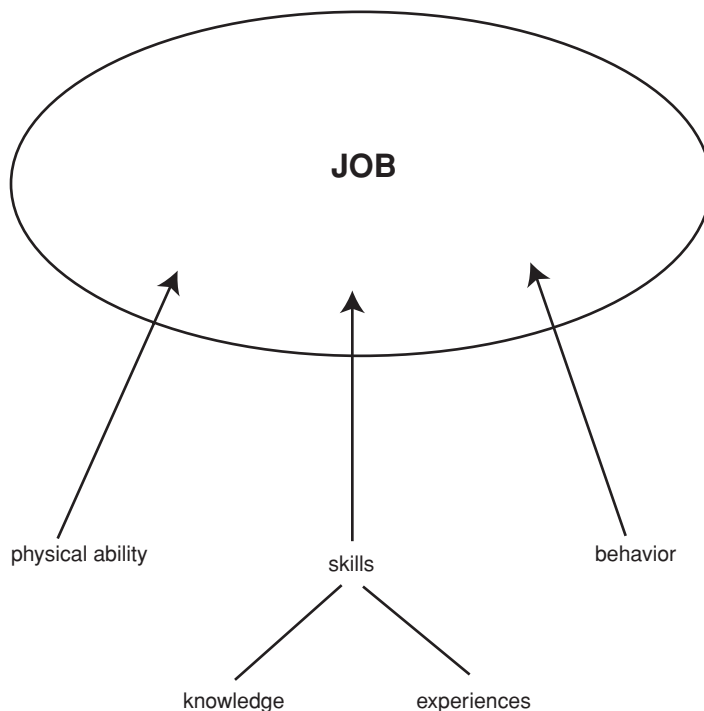


FIGURE 1.4 Elements of a job

for with technology, assistance, and so forth. From a skills (knowledge and experiences) standpoint, we need to master the elements of various consulting methodologies,⁴ communications skills, and so forth. So we should be able to facilitate a meeting, moderate a focus group, interview people, create survey instruments, and so on.

Behaviors, however, often get short shrift. Few of us studied to be consultants, or had a lifelong passion to enter consulting. (I know I didn't, and look what happened to me.) The behaviors an internal consultant needs include, in my estimation:

⁴You may want to refer to my book *Process Consulting* from *The Ultimate Consultant Series*, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2002. It contains a discussion of the various competencies of consulting expertise, how to acquire them, and how to implement them successfully.

- ✓ Perseverance: the willingness and resiliency to rebound from setbacks, to remove roadblocks, and to stay the course, even in the face of criticism and skepticism.
- ✓ High self-esteem: the ability to refuse to take rejection personally, and to disassociate one's own worth from scorn or negativity directed at one's department or colleagues.
- ✓ Well-developed sense of humor: Call this one perspective if you wish, but the truth is that nothing you or I do, no matter how successfully or unsuccessfully, is likely to change the course of civilization as we know it. We need to keep our wits about us.

People succeed or fail at consulting not primarily because of skills, which are learnable, but rather due to behaviors, which are modifiable only within certain tolerances. If we don't have the correct behavioral set, we'll make others sick of us or sicken ourselves. That's what stress does.

- ✓ Willingness to take risks: no risk, no reward. "A highly conservative, successful consultant" is an oxymoron. Consultants aren't around to protect the status quo, although too many internal people seem to take that position. We're not here to stick our toes into the water. We're here to make waves.
- ✓ Creativity and innovation: This goes with the raising of the bar. The real value is in *improving standards and raising performance*. We need to be able to generate new ideas and better ways for our clients to adapt and implement.

Basically, the successful internal consultant will be at the confluence of these three factors: market need, competence, and passion (see Figure 1.5).

You need to be able to see (or create) the needs within the organization for the value you can provide; you must develop and demon-

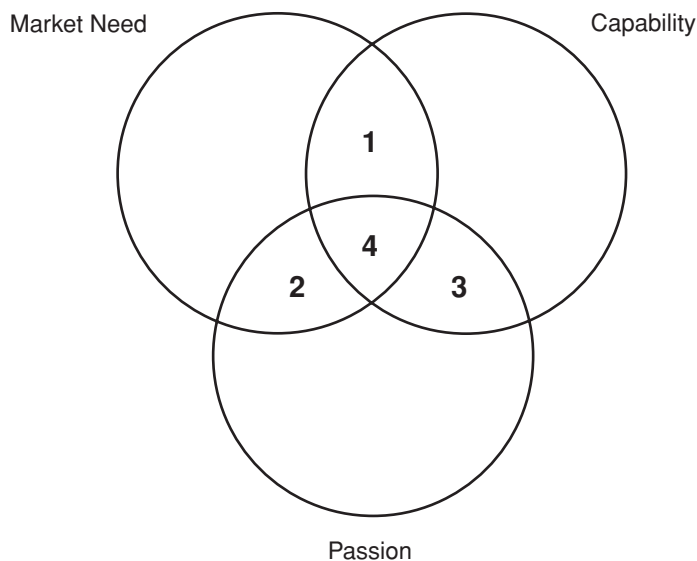


FIGURE 1.5 Need, competence, and passion

strate the competency to meet those needs; and you must be passionate about the prospect of being the key link in that process.

It's as simple—and as achievable—as that. And as baseball pitching legend “Dizzy” Dean observed, “If you can do it, it ain't braggin'.”

SUGGESTED READING

The Consultant's Calling by Geoffrey Bellman (Jossey-Bass, 1990) is a fine treatment of the philosophical basis and attitudinal requirements of the successful consultant. Not many books tackle that subject, and this one is a fine effort.