

Conquering the conundrum of consultancy

Internal consultants can unwittingly find themselves underutilised. This article highlights ten generic failings and shows how to avoid them.

To survive in an arena of downsizing, change, uncertainty and flexible work practices, many HR, IT and finance professionals - and other service providers - have transformed themselves into internal consultants. Yet some fail to recognise that such a change involves a fundamental shift of attitude and behaviour as well as skills.

The great conundrum of internal consultancy is that so often specialists who set out with good intentions are soon regarded at best as an extra pair of hands and at worst as a damn nuisance. Many are left wondering why their credibility is poor, their utilisation is low and they are not involved in the strategic aspects of the business.

Chances are they have fallen foul of one or more of the universal pitfalls. Much can be learned from their mistakes. The ten greatest failings of internal consultants are:

- 1. They over-rely on their previous authority or technical skills.** Consultancy can be defined as any form of intervention into a client system where your power is not related to your hierarchical authority but comes instead from your ability to influence others and your skills at convincing people that you can genuinely add value. Technical skills are clearly insufficient on their own. Just because you have the skills or qualifications, don't assume people will give you the chance to use them.
- 2. They fail to develop their interpersonal skills.** Like their external counterparts, internal consultants need to understand their clients' needs and generate a personal rapport. This involves interpersonal awareness and skills. You need respect for the client, good active listening skills and good questioning skills. You also need to be sensitive to the client's disposition and how they will react. Are they ready to be confronted with differences between their espoused values and their behaviours? You have to learn to choose the best option from those open to you in each circumstance. Much of this comes from experience but you can work on improving your interpersonal skills. If you don't, you'll end up designing a solution that will probably fail to meet the client's real needs or you may fundamentally alienate them in the process.
- 3. They lack the confidence to influence.** Influencing requires an honesty about yourself, a knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses and an ability to adapt to the needs of the individuals involved. Confidence is a prerequisite because there will be times when you need to be assertive if you are to obtain a 'win-win' outcome for yourself and for your client.
- 4. They fail to change from hero to helper.** Traditionally HR professionals were seen as 'heroes', experts in their specialist areas to whom others would refer. The move to consultancy is a paradigm shift which involves a change of role from 'hero' to 'helper'. The prospect of letting go of their expert power - in order to empower, coach and counsel others - is scary for many professionals because it is a threat to their self-esteem and their status. It is very difficult to be both an expert and an enabler. Recognise that your role has changed and that now you need a clearer understanding of strategy, organisational development, internal politics and the impact of change on people.

- 5. Their style doesn't suit.** There are three common consultancy styles. The first is the classic doctor/patient model where the consultant is the expert who tells a client what to do when presented with a given situation. The second is 'a pair of hands', where the client specifies the task and a consultant with the required technical expertise helps out. The third style is the 'partnership' model where both client and consultant have an equal relationship based on complimentary expertise. Together they own the problem, the diagnosis and the solution. The latter style tends to be the most satisfying and probably the most enduring. Clients will often test consultants by using them as an expert or as a pair of hands at the outset. But to develop an effective consultancy relationship, you should aim primarily for partnership.
- 6. They concentrate on 'doing'.** The role of a consultant is about 'being' as well as 'doing'. 'Doing' refers to the technical aspects of consultancy. 'Being' is more about the energy you bring, your personality, your integrity and your ability to relate to the client at some human level.

You need an empathic personal presence and your clients need to respect and trust you. This comes as much from your personal style, as from anything you might say. How you carry yourself, whether you look in control or flustered, how animated you are - all the non-verbal clues give you a sense of presence, as does your tone of voice. At all times, you need to be consistent with how a professional consultant should look, sound and act.
- 7. They skip some aspects of the process.** There is an established cycle of consultancy which involves gaining entry, contracting, investigating, reaching conclusions, making recommendations and delivering to them. At the end, there will usually be a disengagement before the cycle starts again, either by gaining entry elsewhere or by contracting for an extension of the previous assignment. Each step in the cycle is important and should not be overlooked.

There are also three stages of dependency. The first is where the client is dependent on the consultant for guidance. The second involves handing over the skills so that the client can become independent of the consultant. The third stage is true partnership where both parties are inter-dependent and work in an inter-dependent way. Many consultants miss out on the real benefits of true partnership because they are frightened to 'let go' of their clients at the appropriate time.
- 8. They focus on analysis.** Analytical skills are important but they can be overrated. What is required is an ability to make some real sense of the data. You may utilise techniques and models in your diagnosis but it is the ability to step back and see the data in context that is often where the real proficiency lies.
- 9. They assume the presented problem is the underlying problem.** You need to recognise the potential difference between the symptoms and the cause of the problem you are facing. You may be presented with a problem that looks like a business issue but when you investigate, it may actually be an organisational problem in part. Always look for the underlying cause.
- 10. They fail to keep in touch.** It is vital to keep in regular contact with your client throughout the consultancy process. Do not assume that everything is running smoothly just because you are meeting your objectives. Through ongoing communication you'll be able to uncover and deal with any problems and issues that arise, rather than letting them fester. Only with the right attitude, the right skills and through close liaison can you really add value both strategically and operationally.

Of course, these points cover merely the basics of a consultancy skills set. But if you're undertaking - or about to undertake - a consulting role of any kind, you'll find here some of the core competencies you need for success.