Chapter 8

The Role of the Consultant

Prospects are prospects until you get a signature on a statement of work stating that they are going to pay your company for services you provide. Then, they become clients. However, they are also prospects while they are clients. They are prospects for the next service—the one after you complete what you are currently contracted for. This is the so-called *follow-on* work.

If you cannot secure follow-on work, you will not be successful as a consultant. Follow-on work is simply payback for all the effort it takes to put yourself on the client radar, for them to become a prospect and finally a client. This is not simply about the energy put into those companies who become clients. It's about the time, energy, emotions, and money you put into developing the marketplace. In other words, you need those few companies who actually become clients to pay for all of the touches you make to those who don't.

Clients are the best prospects.

Life is short. Those who do come into our circle in this journey should be treated as special. Call it fate or whatever, but by some stroke of coincidence, James Joseph and Franz Sanchez became your clients, vendor contacts, other consultants you associate with, or high-value prospects who you've spent some time with. Don't lose that by becoming complacent in the relationship.

The lines also blur in time spent working as a consultant. I honestly don't know how to answer the question, "How much do you work?" Well, it depends—does that include reading, learning, attending webinars, traveling (am I working at client dinners?), and so on? If you enjoy what you do, it does not matter how much time is spent working.

This is not about a "put on" relationship where you really don't like the person and are faking enjoying the person in order to see what they can do for you sometime. If someone truly rubs you the wrong way, you have my permission to blacklist that person. However, you should always check yourself when you do this, because getting along with others is a key correlate to success. You already have something in common with people you come in contact with in your business. Furthermore, most people have something to give you in a relationship, and it really should be a matter of what degree your relationship will take on, not whether there will be a relationship.

You may be great in this area, or you may need to work at it. True value-added consulting is business, but it's also personal. Some will struggle with this new way of relating to people. It can be a difficult transition for those who have always been employed by others and have maintained a mental distinction between business and personal. With consulting, the lines blur.

It is the relationship, as well as the delivery, that turns the prospect into a client and the client into a repeat client. This chapter deals with the sometimes complicated, exhilarating, seldom linear, and

often frustrating process of the relationship between consultant and client.[1]

Consulting Is a Personal Relationship

In Chapter 1, I talked about abstracting the personal relationship into a set of numbers, or deliverables, in the form of return on investment for the client. I need to caveat that now. Your success with your clients will be measured by your measurable impact, but if you deliver that in a dour or confrontational manner, that impact will certainly be discounted, if not outright voided.

Consulting is a personal relationship. You do not want to compound the fact (and it is a fact) that a client's problems are usually people problems and not technical ones. The consulting you aspire to means you must deal with the people issues behind the complex problems at a client.

Though brought in under the guise of implementing a technical solution to solve a problem, I have seldom seen real problems be caused by technology. Technical implementations, if they go well, will undoubtedly gloss over corporate problems for a while, but the corporate problems will return. Attending to the post-implementation client roles and responsibilities for success is part of true consulting.

The following sections contain some tips for dealing with people and engagement issues.

Curb Your Enthusiasm

If your estimations of value that the client is going to receive seem otherworldly, present a reduced, yet still acceptable, measure of success. I remember formulating one projected return on investment that was in the 500-percent ROI stratosphere. Obviously, the client is going to want to do this, right?! Imagine getting a 500-percent ROI. Fortunately, this consultant was counseled by his client to chop it down to 10 percent of the estimate—50 percent ROI. That's still an eye-popper, but at least it's a more reasonable estimate in the eyes of the executives who would be approving the project. The project was approved and had a good

Your projections need to be kept reasonable.

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[1]And prospect, although I will refer to both client and prospect as "client" for simplicity's sake.

outcome—but more in the 50-percent range than 500 percent after all!

The point is that there certainly is a "good enough" threshold for project justification. Stop with the projected benefits when you get there. Don't look ridiculous by promising to single-handedly solve all their problems—and end world hunger while you're at it.

If what you are proposing does not show acceptable project benefits, then it's not worth doing. Don't propose it. However, all companies need help and have ROI-producing needs right there under your nose. Don't be a one-trick pony. Be creative enough to keep working on your project justification until you show meeting a real need with a real project.

Credit Is a Four-Letter Word

The topic of project justification brings with it the whole matter of credit. Credit in consulting is a four-letter word. If you are looking for pats on the back, consulting may be the wrong field for you. Here's what you want out of a consulting engagement:

- To be paid according to the contract.
- To obtain a reference and/or a referral.
- To learn something of significance.
- To secure a client[2] for life.

Don't look to receive credit; look to give and cause credit for others.

If you only achieve the first goal, you are not allowed to be unhappy. However, you certainly should do whatever is in your control to accomplish the second, third, and fourth goals as well. At a lower scale than a reference is pure appreciation. You should ask for honest feedback on your or your team's performance at various intervals during the engagement. However, it is not usually a client priority to provide the feedback—unless, of course, you are failing miserably and their career is affected.

You are the one who ultimately needs to know whether you are providing good work and good value to the client. Do not be hung up on making sure the spotlight is on you and your work. This kind of hang-up is an albatross to success for a consultant. There sometimes is a complex chain between the client admitting there was a

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[2]People move around, so securing a client for life can refer to either the client company or the client person...or both.

problem and wanting to do something about it. This doesn't always translate into you being the solution. In fact, the best mindset to have about consulting is that you are there to *help the client succeed*.

Corporations Are Problem Creators

Speaking of problems and solutions, ever since man first decided to work together to bring down the beast, disagreements about the collaborations between people have existed. The process has been refined over the years, and there is a normative business behavior pattern. However, this has not erased conflict. The rapid consolidation among corporations these days actually exacerbates human interaction issues. And, folks, humans create the problems that other humans fix.

I get involved in client problems so deeply that sometimes the only seemingly sane thing to think is that once the problem is solved, as complex as it is, it's smooth sailing from there for the client. Wall Street will love it, the stock will jump, sales will rise, competitive advantages will be locked up, and the competition will be doomed. I love solving problems, but there's always another one. It's like a balloon where once you squeeze one end, out pops a bubble at the other end. Squeeze it, and...well, you get the picture. Problem number two—a distant, uninteresting problem two weeks ago—is now priority one.

Keep an eye out for your client's problems that you can solve...er, help them solve.

Client solutions are often known by the client—just somewhere else in the organization and not the person you are talking to. Be that person who seeks out those opinions and, if they have merit, surfaces them (with due credit if the originating person wants it). Especially at lower levels, employees are often stifled in expressing their opinions, but this does not mean they do not have valid opinions.

Be on the lookout for ways you can help your client beyond what you were brought in for. There are always problems to be solved.

Consulting Is About Tradeoffs

It is a tremendously key skill to be able to articulate various ways to get to an end state. These end states usually come with trade-offs that look like this:

Aggressive	*Risk Adverse*
Lots of people on the project	Fewer people on the project
Large goals	Small goals
Aggressive timelines	Manageable timelines
High risk	Low risk
Low business involvement	High business involvement
Just the end goal	Interim goals along the way to an end goal

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Your client may be pushing you into one extreme or the other, only to find out he is ultimately not willing to live with the trade-offs that come with that selection. For example, you are asked to complete a project in three months. You think that is very reasonable, so you only bring one additional person with you to accomplish the task.

Too many consultants only present alternatives to the client that make sense for the consultant—and they look greedy in the process. Good consulting always takes client needs into consideration first in communicating tradeoffs.

One month into the project, something seems to have changed. The client is suddenly looking at the project for the deliverables. Perhaps he shares with you some of the new pressures that he is under; perhaps not. Either way, it's time to get more aggressive with the project. You may need to move toward the aggressive side of the tradeoffs. While you should have had the tradeoff conversation with the client already, it's now time to lay out some new possibilities for the client. You can add another person and meet the deliverable goals more quickly. You can cut some corners to get to the deliverables more quickly. You can more sharply define the expected deliverables so you are *sure* you are working spot-on to the specific, grievous problem. You can enlist more support or involvement from the client team. Et cetera... You need to know your deliverables well enough to present these alternatives *at all times*. You furthermore should be sensing the "tea leaves" of the project and *suggesting* the alternatives that make sense for the client.

I have never said "I can't" to a client. There is a way. It may be a tradeoff to be considered, or it may be a tradeoff to be determined. Deem yourself capable of investigating alternatives, perhaps even suggesting another consultancy to handle an aspect of a client problem if they will provide better ROI to the client than your firm will.

Most environments resemble a mishmash (yes, that's the technical term) of the good and the bad. It's a combination of well-architected structures and those that were obviously designed to meet an urgent need regardless of the longer-term consequences. This dualistic reality is true for all organizations.

Are the well-architected structures right and the others wrong? That depends on your perspective. There is no easy answer. However, there are effectiveness and efficiency measures. Effectiveness is measured by the client's ability to meet specific needs—and how long they are going to be able to do so with current support levels before re-architecting is necessary. A quick and dirty solution may meet a singular short-term need in a timely and very effective manner, and it may be well architected when you don't consider the longer-term needs. However, it is efficiency that usually enforces good solution architecture.

For example, many corporate programs still operate using fairly rudimentary, home-built solutions that conform to no guidelines. As the needs grow—and especially the need to integrate—the

patchwork approach required to pull together the disparate structures grows too...and it becomes painful.

Essentially, these departments wish they had a more suitable corporate approach, where all the requirements—both now and in the future—can be met, so that they can immediately exploit the data or quickly add it when needed. How long until they bite the bullet and consolidate into a "bigger hat" solution? It will likely happen, but when? However, if the unarchitected components meet the need accurately and in a timely fashion, it is difficult to argue that the solution is wrong.

Be a Positive Communicator

Playing the blame game happens all around us at all times. Sometimes it's subtle; other times it's quite overt. What seems to happen once an employee leaves? Often, his or her peers suddenly find out that he hasn't been doing a good job after all, and the company is better off without the former employee. This is a form of the blame game. The reality usually is a form of the fact that everybody does things different and has different opinions.

Coders use different coding standards. Project leaders take different approaches. Sometimes methodologies don't translate to different technologies. And timing is everything—we don't know the tradeoffs that were in effect in situations in the past, especially under different management regimes.

When you enter a client situation, to make yourself look better, you may be tempted to cast all manner of dispersion on the situation you find—and, by extension, the people (some gone and some still there) who helped to create the situation. The client may even be expecting you to do so. As a consultant, you have to identify the problems as you see them, and the client is owed your opinion. However, be judicious with blame. Your focus should be on the future and how to get there.

If you suggest any kind of change, some will get their feathers ruffled. It is inevitable. Once I did an assessment of a client environment. It turned out to be an evaluation of a project that had been done by another consultancy. Interestingly, the executives who received my report decided to share it with everyone currently on the team. That's their prerogative, and unless I know ahead of time that there will be a very limited readership of my

You need good sense to minimize alienation and keep the client focused on a better future. It is never my intention, as a consultant, to see client personnel replaced. That is a client decision. I objectively point out the pros/cons and best way forward with the situations I find at the client.

deliverables, I don't write anything I wouldn't want anybody in the company reading, should the sponsor of the work choose to share it.

Each recipient was invited to formally reply to the report anonymously. Here's the point: Despite my objectiveness, the responses ranged. At one end of the spectrum, people thought I was treating the consultancy with kid gloves because, after all, we consultants "protect each other." At the other end of the spectrum, some people thought I was overly critical of the project. Everybody has their opinions.

Be Very Conscious of Naming Conventions

Industries that spawn consulting organizations to support them have a very difficult time reining in the nomenclature of that industry. With every vendor and consultant trying to leave their mark on the industry, acronyms are created left and right, and once-sacred definitions are continually nuanced, if not outright replaced. Eventually the phrasings become meaningless. It all depends on who you talk to.
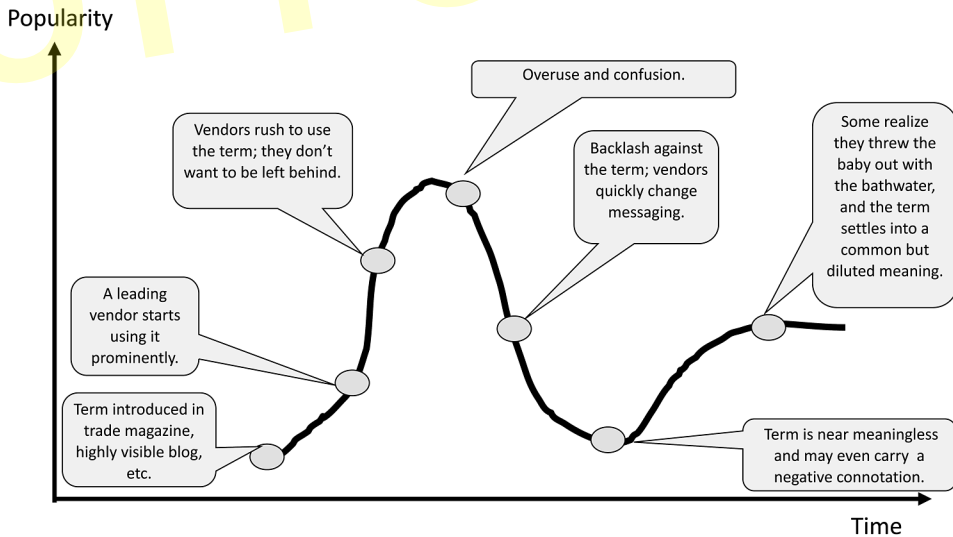

Figure 8.1 *The lifecycle of a term in a thriving industry.*

The point is that you can look for your opportunity to inject your definition into the industry if you wish to join that fray. An effective alternative—and one that your clients might appreciate—is to speak (and write) to clients as if they are being bombarded by overlapping definitions in the industry you represent, full of hard-to-follow homonyms and synonyms (because they are). Example consultative talk might include, "You may hear OLAP referred to as any kind of data access, or you may hear it referred to as specific forms of data access that include the ability to see your business metrics by any business dimension."

<div style="float:right">Labels are not used consistently.</div>

If the client happens to want to go with some definitions that seem to be working in their environment, go with it. You should be flexible enough to accommodate them. However, the efficiency and convenience of everyone being on the same page with their references is unmistakable. If there is opportunity, you can then feel free to forge your chosen definitions into the client situation. But do so with the caveat that they may hear or read different definitions of the term and/or different terms used to describe whatever it is you're describing. And do so with the explanation of why labeling is important.

When it comes to naming conventions and labeling, the consultant must also guard against his or her own prejudices, or it will soon become evident that the consultant and client are clearly on different pages. Confusion does not a good relationship make. When you see a problem at a client that you've seen before, sure, it's great that you have the experience fixing it. Just remain vigilant throughout the process in case flexibility is required.

The Occam's Razor Principle of Consulting

Occam's Razor (paraphrased) states that the simplest explanation is usually the best one. At some level, there is a finite set of problems that clients may be having that you are addressing. Think about your client (past and future) situations that you may be called on to address. On one page, list them out. At a high level, something should be done about each situation that you want to influence in the client relationship.

For example, you may find software that is so old that its vendor refuses to support the client anymore. Not only is this causing all manner of support costs and delays, but the client is likely missing interesting new features that the client is building workarounds for. Quite often, these client cultures lack an understanding of the importance of staying relatively current with their chosen technology. Instead of perpetuating complex workarounds, it may be the upgrade is the simple lever to turn to produce the best results for the client.

The simple answer to a client problem is often the best one.

You are looking for leverage at a client. You are looking to make a small change that will result in the biggest impact for the client. It is only reasonable to assume that, in most cases, despite your best efforts, you are only going to be able to make one small change at a time. Make immediate impacts by effecting small changes with as large of results as possible. If the results are not large but at least progressive, look to make continued immediate impacts that add up. Coming into an organization—especially a large one—looking to make big changes without the intermediate steps is tantamount to failure.

What Could Go Wrong?

Once scope is set for an engagement, the best question for a consultant to ask (themselves and others) is, "What could go wrong?" Once you know the answers to this question—and keep asking this question until there are no more answers—you can then set about taking care of all of those factors and increasing the chances of success with the client engagement. By the way, even if you think you know all the answers, ask people at the client for their answers to the question. They will tell you.

Recalling that consulting is about tradeoffs, if you do not have the resources to reasonably take care of all possible negative outcomes, these belong in your communications with the client.

This is also a way of tapping into your inner thoughts and bringing them out into practice. Consulting is a mental game, and one difference you must bring is the ability to see what others don't. The best way to draw that out is to continually ask questions, and the best one is, "What could go wrong?"

The Use of Guiding Principles

Finally, every organization should work from a methodological approach. However, the approach needs to be tempered with accommodation for urgent needs. A plan for getting back to the desired methodology and architecture should accompany these approach details. Let's call it all *guiding principles*.

Guiding principles include the exception conditions for their use. However, what if an urgent need arises for data in a "quick and dirty" manner, and your latency factor for building the solution in an elegant structure is too slow to meet the need? You can correct this systemically—as you probably should—but there's no one to step up with the budget for this now. The proponents of the urgent need can argue that is not their burden to bear, and they would be right.

Yet don't give up on your guiding principles too easily. They are worth fighting for. Usually, after adding a few basic processes to the environment, architected solutions are quicker to come by than unarchitected ones.

This is the essence of a hybrid, best-of-breed approach. It accommodates the urgent needs of the business while adhering to a flexible, scalable approach that will ultimately provide the most effective balance of both efficiency and effectiveness.

I'm sure most of you can appreciate these mixed messages that are commonplace when advising on areas of judgment. Consulting is a judgment issue—both initially and on an ongoing basis.

The chances of successful efforts significantly correlate to having people with the right characteristics for success on the project—or at least enough of them to compensate for those who do not have the right characteristics. Also, success goes far beyond technical skills, and good technical skills need to be balanced with communication and direction-setting.

An overriding characteristic needed is sound judgment or the ability to arrive at and act on a consensus of opinion, including:

- The ability to arrive at a rational consensus within a group
- Respect for and understanding of the validity of other viewpoints
- Putting the good of the group ahead of the individual

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Putting together the what, when, and who has created the most successful consultant-client relationships in the world.

Action Plan

✓ Make a list today of whom you can help get credit from their superiors at work.

✓ Identify the buzzwords you use and identify how the industry and your clients may be using the terms.

✓ List the problems you will typically find at clients and their most simplistic solutions.

✓ Develop approaches to uniquely provide those solutions.

✓ Decide to be a positive communicator.

✓ Ask yourself "What could go wrong?"…and take care of the answers!