



Toward a Healthy Client – Consultant Relationship

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Consulting is simple. But don't make the mistake of equating "simple" with "easy".

You may have heard some version of the story where, after quietly examining a malfunctioning machine, an outside expert marks an "X" showing the machine's owner where to strike with a hammer. The owner follows this advice, and finding the machine fixed, happily turns to the expert, asking "How much do I owe you?" The expert responds "\$10,000." The owner, astonished, replies "All you did was draw an 'X', how can that cost \$10,000?" The expert then shows an invoice listing two charges:

- Drawing an 'X' - \$1.00.
- Knowing where to put it - \$9,999.00.

The story illustrates the difference between the value of an action and the expertise behind it. This is the essence of consulting – providing expert advice. The expert in the story is paid for the results derived from his expertise – the machine is fixed.

The Role of the Consultant

Put simply, the role of the consultant is to improve the client's situation – that's it.

Unfortunately many consultants are unable to make the distinction between this concept and the less beneficial practice (to both the consultant and the client) of "doing whatever the client says."

If the client can accomplish their objectives by simply directing subordinates, why waste time and money hiring an expert? The consultant is a peer of the client, a partner, working in collaboration to improve a situation. Both parties benefit from this.

"Your project is our priority" is a common theme of many consultant's marketing materials. This sounds good – but;

- 1 – Would anyone really claim otherwise?
and,
- 2 – Generic platitudes like this lack any kind of real meaning without the behaviors to support them.

The consultant's main priority is to stay in business (unless it's a hobby - and I'm not sure how many clients are interested in hiring a weekend warrior). How well can a consultant focus on helping their client if the consultant is worried about keeping the lights on?

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that consultants should offer their clients a mediocre effort or avoid going the 'extra-mile'. Quite the contrary. To offer the best service, consultants themselves must carefully consider their own role in the client-consultant relationship.

As with any significant relationship, there must be balance or the relationship will eventually break down despite the best efforts, however well meaning, of either party. The following lists several productive (and counter-productive) behaviors that consultants often employ in their client relationships. Of course none of the 'productive' behaviors guarantee a successful client relationship, but they make it more likely by helping to create balance. Conversely, spending too much time on the 'counter-productive' side leads to an imbalance in the relationship, putting it, and ultimately the consultant themselves, at risk of failure.

Productive	Counter-productive
Viewed by the client as a peer, an expert	Viewed by the client as a subordinate
Actually listens to the client	Anticipates what the client will say - and replies with prepared response
Focuses on providing value	Focuses on methods
Focuses on helping the client	Focuses on the sale
Provides a customized solution	Provides a commodity
Focuses on the result	Focuses on the deliverable
Provides what the client needs	Provides what the client wants
When feasible, bases fees on the value provided, allowing for fair compensation for the consultant and a great return on investment for the client - both parties benefit from quality, speed, and efficiency.	Bases fees on units - time, materials, or a combination, creating a conflict of interest - a quicker or more efficient outcome benefits the client, but is a detriment to the consultant and vice-versa.

To have the best opportunity for success, you must put yourself in the best position possible. As with most significant relationships, there must be balance in the client-consultant relationship. Without it, the relationship will eventually decline, to the detriment of both parties.

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