

# So What Good are Consultants Anyway?

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**W**hen uncertainty abounds, consulting flourishes as people seek out experts to “show them the way.” The adage “advice is cheap” does not apply to consultants. Expert recommendations are costly, making it important to carefully research which particular consultant to hire and to understand consultants’ overall strengths and limitations.

The decision to use a consultant should be based on an understanding that the organization has a need for what the consultant offers. The scope of the work must be identified before contact. Also, there should be consensus by the parties involved that they will be open and willing to share with the consultants the objectives and constraints of the project.<sup>1</sup> “There is no formula for selecting the right consulting firm to fit the needs of an organization.”<sup>2</sup> Consider the size, expertise and association of the firm. Will the particular consultant be a principal, specialist or junior level partner? Is the consulting company an independent firm or a regional office of a large conglomerate? Is its focus primarily health care or accounting?<sup>1</sup> The answers to these questions will determine which firms to contact for on-site visits.

In addition to considering the initial concerns and the immediate ramifications of hiring consultants, the format and details of the final report should be discussed with the consultants also. What type of documentation will be provided?<sup>3</sup> Are they willing to cite sources for the recommendations that they are making? Can they provide references from facilities similar to yours in size and nature and in the scope of the consultation? Failure to determine this information in advance could lead to misunderstandings and disappointment.

After carefully choosing certain consultants for visits, it also is important to “get the people who are doing the work talking to the consultant” while they are on site. Ask for feedback from the staff. Is there good chemistry? Is everyone comfortable with the person who visited? Will that be the person who performs the work? Do the consultants speak the same language; are they listening?<sup>1</sup> Are they trying to sell more than is needed? These particular

concerns should be examined with an understanding of the overall strength of the consultants.

Experience and understanding of the marketplace are the most valuable commodities that consultants offer. They are experts who have developed a better way or who have learned valuable lessons through trial and error or education and training. They often suggest a new or unique solution to a nagging problem. Consultants provide a series of options that they know have been successful in similar situations. They also recognize what potential solutions are not likely to work well.

The strength of experience also allows them to operate quickly. In most instances, consultants are well traveled and have an intuitive sense of organization culture, allowing them to see the “big picture.” Their assessment skills are keen from practice, allowing them to make quick evaluations of problems within facilities. By comparing and

contrasting the information with other situations, consultants are able to develop recommendations that meet the unique needs of an organization.

Because they are outsiders, consultants can propose recommendations that might not be considered valid if proposed by someone inside the organization, who might be perceived to have a

vested interest in the outcome. With their credentials, consultants can suggest solutions that previously had been considered only briefly within the organization or ignored because they were not viewed as expert solutions when coming from “a prophet without honor.” Consultants are revered for their expertise, and thus, can carry the banner to victory when the insider cannot.

Consultants also have the ability to move through the “invisible walls” in organizations and reach conclusions that are otherwise hidden. As outsiders, consultants are not expected to know what is taboo, so they can ask the unaskable and suggest the unsuggestable. They can recommend organization changes that would be seen as “kingdom building” if suggested by an insider. Consultants are only in the organization by invitation and do not have any vested interest in a particular department or group. Thus, they can objectively align and redesign without consideration for what a facility views “untouchable.”

During redesign and reorganization, consultants can supplement a staff’s strengths. If a particular skill is missing from a team, a consultant

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can fill that role temporarily. Such temporary use might eliminate the need for a permanent person. Consultants can provide needed manpower for completion of a project when resources within the organization are lacking. When a project manager is needed only to see a project to completion, a consultant can be the most labor- and cost-effective method for achieving that goal.

Because they are not vested in particular individuals inside organizations, consultants can objectively recommend reductions in staff or management. Because they are not permanently in a facility, they can literally “leave and take the smell of blood with them.” They can evaluate performance against national standards and can recommend without malice or pity replacement or removal of inadequate performers. Such decisions often are difficult for management or administration because they can be personally involved with the staff.

However, consultants’ roles as outsiders also have limitations. Consultants, by their nature, are temporary. They do not live in the environment. They do not have to live with the fallout or results of their recommendations. Even if they are involved in implementation, consultants are not line administrators, and they do not have to be around to sweep up.

Although consultants can offer expert recommendations, they are limited to just that: proposing. They are advisers, not dictators. Although consultants are used often as scapegoats (which is highly appropriate and expected in some situations), in reality, they do not have the authority to make changes in an organization. It is ultimately the decision of an administration or a board to accept and implement or reject recommendations. Even if consultants have plans for implementation—again, an administration must decide how or whether to implement changes. Consultants do not have line authority in a facility. They cannot wield power that they do not possess.

Consultants also do not have the power to force an administration to accept recommendations. In some cases, assessments and recommendations are so clearly correct that anyone could recognize them. If an administration is determined not to proceed, however, consultants have no choice but to take their check and leave. Paying for advice does not ensure that the advice will be taken. Consultants are limited in their ability to change behavior. In hospital consulting there are

often requests to “get the doctors to do this or that.” But consultants cannot force people to change who they are or make a distrusted administration suddenly seem trustworthy. Consultants do not have the time to build long-term relationships effective in modifying behavior. Because they are new individuals with good client references, physicians frequently develop a rapport with consultants, which can be the embryonic stage in changing the relationship between an administration and a medical staff. When consultants leave, however, an administration

becomes responsible for the follow-through. Failure to do so can make a situation worse rather than improve it.

The same is true with changing staff behavior and opinions. Nothing takes the place of a relationship with the staff. If perceived lies or deceit have created a lack of credibility, consultants can bring the message that “the administration hired us to help repair the damage; they are willing and want to work with you to improve your organization.”

Again, such positive steps only set the stage and offer an opportunity. Consultants cannot make relationships better. The administration must make a

commitment to and take advantage of the opportunities that consultants offer.

When used appropriately and judiciously, consultants can be of invaluable benefit to an organization. If they are inappropriately used or if their recommendations are just filler for the bookshelf, then money spent on consultation is wasted.

This decade will likely be remembered as the time of the consultants. They have provided a needed service to many industries. But properly measuring the success of consulting in the short or long term must account for consultants’ strengths and limitations. Because talk is not cheap, evaluations of consultants’ worth must not be cut short either. Spending time determining which consultant to hire, the extent of consulting services needed, and the initial commitment to the implementation required is essential for a successful consultation and a quality return on the investment.

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