



The Naked Consulting Series!

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Compass

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2.1



Naked Consulting

by David A. Schmaltz

List the consulting trade as another in crisis. Even before the demise of Arthur Anderson amid the Enron collapse, consultants were held in deep suspicion. After these headline-grabbing events, many would-be clients would rather spend a week confined with an incontinent used car dealer than engage with a consultant.

This is not altogether bad news. Many consulting relationships have been initiated as a form of denial. Denial that the client could figure it out by themselves or that the situation really was hopeless. We should all submit to outside advice as if we were agreeing to major surgery, but such caution was out of favor in the booming nineties.

No more! Clients have become really cautious and consultants have become incredibly seductive in response. Why would anyone engage with a consultant they could not trust? Do you know how to tell if your consultant is trustworthy? Why would anyone choose to be a consultant in this deeply suspicious climate? These questions are worth deep consideration.

A mentor offered my first real insight after I entered this tattered trade. "If you can do anything else besides consulting, do that." His advice has turned out to be remarkably prescient. Consulting has certainly been the most difficult career I could have chosen.

I'm not complaining, but acknowledging. I can honestly admit that I am otherwise unemployable, yet I have no compulsion to tell others what to do. This makes me an odd duck in the consulting field, which is overflowing with odd ducks. My clients tell me that differences appear when I show up. Neither of us can describe exactly what I do. I'll try and perhaps fail to explain here.

Over the next three weeks, this special series of *Compass* looks at Consulting. In it, I consider what consulting has been and what it might become in the future. Consulting is a widely misunderstood and commonly abused business. Few clients understand how they influence their consultant's success and consultants are too often just as clueless about how they help their clients fail.

How clients and consultants contract for and control consulting engagements almost guarantees poor results.

I create this series to convince you to hire me the next time you need consulting help. If you were better informed about your choices, you might choose differently when you hire your next consultant. This difference might include hiring me. Whether you hire me or not, you should be better informed before you sign your next contract.

Not all consultants want you to know what I'm going to disclose here. I don't expect to receive any awards from my fellows as a result. However you receive this information, please understand my intentions. Neither client nor consultant are as skilled at satisfying each other as they could and should be. If you are one of the vast minority who have never been dissatisfied with a consultant, count yourself as neither lucky nor wise. Dissatisfaction is one of the unavoidable

attributes of great consulting relationships. Intrigued? Read on.



Continued ...



Why Do You Choose A Consultant?

I start my considering here. With you, the contracting client, not with the consultant, because your motives are the first important consideration.

What sort of client are you? Are you the sort who runs off to the doctor at the first hint of sniffles or are you the sort that only agrees to advice when wheeled into an ER on a gurney? Are you a hard-boiled skeptic or a deep-fried optimist? Do you do it by the book or do you prefer to jump out of whatever box you find yourself in?

A cynical fellow consultant once told me that consulting relationships are always between "sheeps and wolves". If you characterize yourself as either sheep or wolf, you are ripe fleece for any consulting wolf. If you acknowledge yourself as a wolf, do you usually hire sheep consultants. Or do you usually, for some inexplicable reason, usually find yourself hiring wolves? Either way, it's sheeps and wolves. The client has the first move and need not engage as mindlessly as my colleague describes.

So consider the consulting relationships you've been involved in. What were you looking for? If you were looking for a magic pill, you shouldn't be surprised to discover that you found one and that it did little long-term to resolve your complaint. If you were looking for a quick fix, you shouldn't be surprised to find that the quick fix didn't last. If you were looking for someone to tell you what to do, don't be surprised if you found yourself feeling disqualified by the expert's advice.

And don't be surprised that you were able to find someone, wheth-

er sheep or wolf, to do your bidding. Consultants are very skilled at appearing to be the species you are looking for. Did you require the wolf to dress up in sheep's clothing?

Ask yourself this. Did you insist upon a dedication test before contracting with the consultant or did you just look at the vitae, talk to a few former clients, and consider that good enough? Remember, references have a vested interest in reporting successful consulting relationships and references are specifically chosen because they support the consultant. You will not very often find a consultant willing to refer you to a dissatisfied client. You could ask. Even better if the consultant offers to connect you with clients who either chose not to work with him or those for whom the magic did not emerge. I've worked with only two consultants who offered "failed" clients as references, and I have to admit in retrospect that I discounted their testimony more than I should have.

The Dedication Test

If you can't trust references (and you shouldn't), put the consultant to work before the engagement and observe the results. Ideally, the consultant should offer you a dedication test. Rather than simply trying to please or appease you, the best consultants first work to qualify you as a client. This qualification step is a dedication test.

It appears as some inconveniencing assignment, a request, or an observation. It is intended to shift the conversation from one of speculation into something more firmly grounded. He might ask you what it's not okay to talk about. A stunning question which, if you respond, will transform whatever wasn't discussable into something you can actually talk about. He might ask you to prepare a list of everything

that's working well, rather than insisting upon either probing for pathology or demanding a clear statement of objective. This is intended to test the boundaries of the emerging relationship. How you comply, while important, is never nearly as important as that he asked.

If your consultant does not qualify you, consider disqualifying him immediately. If you don't feel comfortable doing that, at least offer a dedication test to him and observe how he is in action. Ask him to describe a failed assignment. If he hasn't had one—or won't admit to having had one—you are not his client. Let him cut his teeth on an innocent sheep. If he bad mouths a client in response, imagine yourself in that client's skin. He'll have a story about you if you proceed.

Real consultants are first interested in how you came to decide that you needed a consultant. They will question your motives and challenge your preconceptions, initially disappointing your innocent aspirations. The road to delight is paved with such disappointments. Your presenting problem is only rarely directly resolvable. Because of this, the problem you first report when contacting the consultant is almost never the problem. The consultant knows this. You should, too.

Expect your consultant to reframe your complaint, to troll for a more conveniently solvable form. If you ask for reengineering help and your consultant bobble-heads with a vitae of reengineering experience, set the expectation gauge to "probable failure." Would you trust a doctor who started prescribing pills based upon your diagnosis?

I won't pull any wool over your eyes. Clients get the consultants they deserve. Consultants get the clients they deserve, too.



Why Consultants Consult

There are as many different motives fueling consultants as there are consultants. Some fell into it and are repeating habitual motions. Others disqualified themselves from every other occupational alternative and are cursed to the calling. Many, perhaps most, fell in through a bathroom window. There is no front door to a consulting career.

Almost no one entered through one of the large, formal consulting firms, and even these folks are remarkably poorly trained in consulting. In the same way that few entrepreneurs have, aspire to have, or really need an MBA, few consultants have impressive academic credentials. Little in academia prepares anyone for what we inside it call "the life." A surprisingly large number moonlight as consultants, having sustaining occupations as teachers, writers, or retirees.

Most of us entered with what I call a dodge, a credential which describes an expertise. We were successful project managers or senior executives, and we advertise as if these experiences prepared us to perform as consultants. They most certainly did not! Yet our clients insist upon us having, even touting our dodge, even though these experiences have little to do with what we might be called upon to bring to bear when consulting.

Many consult to right some wrong or to show others how to do things correctly. These motives influence every relationship they enter into. Every consultant has feet of clay, and every client will discover this fact at some point in their working relationship with the consultant. How both parties react to this dis-

covery will largely define the results of the engagement.

Peter Block claims that most clients want their consultant to be their mommy and make it better, and that it's the consultant's responsibility to dissuade them of this desire. Those who enter consulting to provide mothering and to make it better for their clients eventually undermine themselves and their clients. Do what you can as early as you can to discover your consultant's motives. You do not need a surrogate mother to make it better for you, no matter how much you might aspire to have your consultant become your mom.

The Character's Character

Every client can determine their consultant's motives for engaging, but very few ever stop to consider this critical issue. You should be interested in this character's character.

You don't have to play silly games to uncover your consultant's motives. Ask. Then listen and observe. A good client questions their consultant's motives.

When I first entered consulting, a partner and I were summoned to an extremely successful high technology company where we were subjected to the most humiliating cross examination. The client was remarkably demeaning in their questioning. I learned in the course of this grilling that this group had been disappointed by a couple of earlier consulting relationships, and was adamant about weeding out any potential weak ones before engaging in another one. At one point, the senior manager sneered, "With your company's reputation, I expected you to show up in wizard suits."

My partner and I blew off the comment and treated ourselves to a

fine dinner, where we drank altogether too much wine celebrating that we would never have to work with those nasty people, confident that we'd failed the interview.

The next morning, we were surprised to find a message on our voice mail, asking us to come in for a senior management interview. I looked at my partner and said, "I'm getting a wizard suit." Over his protests, I rented a fine gray velvet wizard suit with moons and stars, and carried it over my arm as the nasty senior manager from the earlier session escorted us through security.

"What's that you have over your arm?" she asked.

"A wizard suit," I replied. She rolled her eyes as we entered the elevator.

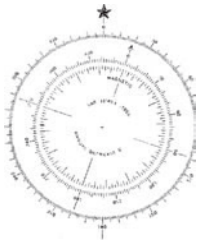
I put on the wizard suit as soon as we entered the top floor conference room, where a half dozen senior managers sat around an enormous conference table. Then I said, "Our companies both have magic sounding names. Because of this, our customers quite naturally expect us to give them magic, when we both know that magic cannot be given to anyone else. I wear this wizard suit today in the spirit of true collaboration with which, together, we will create the magic we both desire."

Then I sat down while my partner presented the slide show. They hired us. And we were able to create pure magic with them. I believe this would have been impossible had I not chosen to wear the wizard suit and speak a small unspeakable truth. Their earlier disappointments came from an unreasonable expectation, one they were only too familiar with. Refusing to give them the magic they demanded enabled us to produce together the magic we both desired.



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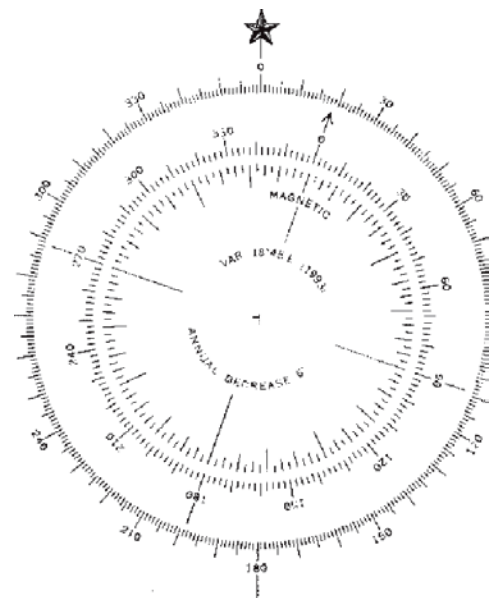
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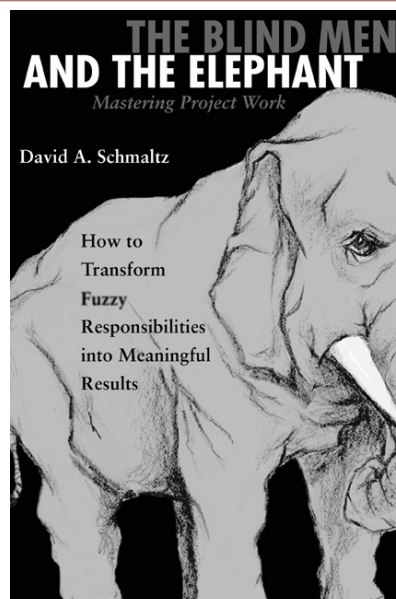


The Blind Men and the Elephant

"There were six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined..."

So begins John Godfrey Saxe's fable of the blind men who failed to see an elephant together. Though each was able to perceive their piece of the beast, none were able to integrate their individual perspective into a coherent whole.

The result? You've seen it on each of your projects. During that time, which sometimes extends until after the project



concludes, factions argue about the true nature of the beast which none of the combatants will ever see.

In my book, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, *Mastering Project Work*, (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), I consider this universal feature of our project work and offer some simple tactics for creating the coherent experiences we each aspire to achieve.

Google the title or my name to see reviews of the book. It'll soon be available in Chinese, Russian, Dutch, Spanish, and Korean.

Order your copy today:

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