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From The Field Of

Consultant's ethical obligations must rise above self-interest

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BILL SUTTON

Having been in a consulting capacity for more than two decades, I am more than a little concerned about consulting practices I have seen in the last two years. Maybe what I have seen is just symptomatic of the self-interest that has led to many of our current economic conditions.

Here are suggestions for consultants and the organizations that employ them.

■ Specific expertise

Consultants are usually engaged to assess a situation or to help solve a problem. As such, it is essential that they have an expertise in the specific area in question.

For example, in my consulting practice I specialize in revenue production and enhancement. Experience has taught me to look at how an organization generates revenue. I suggest ways to improve those areas as well as to identify new revenue streams.

Finding additional revenue derived from food and beverage considerations might be part of my recommendation. But despite having been in most of the sport venues in this country, I lack the expertise to examine such specific issues as traffic flow to concession areas, speed of service or even how many ounces a hot dog should weigh. I leave those issues to someone with that particular food and beverage expertise.

■ Critical assessment

Consultants owe the organization candor. They must be able to deliver a critical assessment of the situation they have been charged to analyze, even if it reflects negatively on the person who did the hiring.

While telling someone what he or she wants to hear might result in a new consulting agreement, in the long run it will prove damaging to both the organization and the perception of the consultants. If the consultants do their job and offer a solution that addresses the situation or solves the problem, then two things can happen:

1. The consultants will be offered another agreement focusing on a different issue for some part of the organization.
2. The consultants effectively put themselves out of business, at least temporarily with that organization, while generating positive word-of-mouth endorsements that may lead to similar opportunities with other organizations.

■ Presentation of findings

Consultants should always arrange to make a face-to-face presentation of their findings in a forum that will encourage people to ask questions, generate alternatives and explain the rationale for the suggestions laid out in the report.

While this may seem obvious, I can assure you it is not. And not having the opportunity for team management to question and discuss the report



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with the authors — especially in the case of an idea or suggestion that could be viewed as damaging to a person or department — is probably the biggest single source of dissatisfaction that a client has with a consultant.

The capacity for a consulting report to create dialogue, generate alternative courses of action and move an organization to take a harder look at its decision-making process is a benefit that can be derived from presenting the report and engaging those whom it will affect.

A consulting report should be written in language that is easily understood by members of the organization. The goal isn't to demonstrate the vocabulary and cleverness of the consultants, but rather to identify problems and issues, propose solutions and encourage discussion about the best ways to proceed.

The same is true for the statistics and graphic representations contained in the report.

Consultants should explain what a regression analysis is and what the findings mean by using a narrative as well as a table.

If a line graph clearly demonstrates what you are trying to say, do not feel the need for some three-dimensional model. Information is most effective when it is easily understood and can lead to better communications and acceptance of the course of action.

■ Intellectual property

The report is the property of the organization that engaged the consultants. As such, the consultants should not share copies of the report or discuss its situations, scenarios, personnel, findings and recommendations without the permission of the contracting organization.

Sending copies or excerpts of reports as part of the solicitation process to acquire new business is far more common than it should be and represents unethical and unacceptable behavior on the part of the consultants.

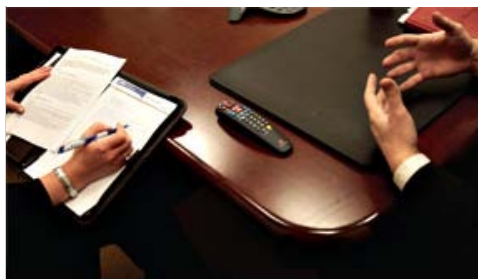
Finally, consultants must consider the situational factors involved at each particular organization and propose possible solutions and alternatives specific to the organization with an understanding of the implications of such recommendations.

While there are best practices and considerations from past consulting assignments that probably would be effective in the current situation, the consultants must be convinced that they are truly best practices, rather than just what people consider good albeit untested ideas.

Just because something worked at one team is no guarantee that it will work at another. There are many situational marketing factors involved, the most important consideration being the talent of the people charged with implementing the strategy. As we all know, failure to execute has doomed many a good idea.

This article is not an indictment of consultants but rather a wake-up call for all of us to do better, and for those organizations seeking to employ us to hold us to high standards in creating a product that is mutually beneficial and makes a difference in our industry.

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GUIDELINES FOR CONSULTANTS

1. Make sure your specific expertise applies to the issue the company wants addressed.
2. Be honest in your assessment to the company. Avoid telling the organization only what it wants to hear.
3. Present findings in a face-to-face forum and make sure your written report is understandable by members of the organization.
4. Keep the organization's confidence by not sharing the report without the organization's permission.

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