

Reflection 23. Consulting for Change

I've been a service provider to the financial industry either within a capacity building project or as a consultant for long. I've also grown and mentored consulting teams. In my time I've realised, there is only one thing that people want from a consultant, and that is change. To solve a problem or to be better than they are now.

A great consultant offers experience, exposure, tools, independence, integrity, and objectivity all the time whilst delivering the product or service that the client is paying for. Experience and exposure is especially important when it comes to consulting around policy and ecosystem development. A consultant almost by definition is being paid for his/her opinions, in fact, to be opinionated, but to put this opinion in context and deliver it appropriately.

However, as a consultant it is not always easy to evaluate whether you have achieved the change the client has sought, for a very simple reason, the results of your inputs take time to evaluate. Usually by then you have moved on to the next set of assignments.

So, it is important for consultants to take time, to pause and evaluate have they achieved the change desired by the client? At the same time, as customers, do take time to provide feedback to the consultant on whether their assignment was successful, what it achieved, or how it could have been better. Its only with feedback that we improve.

In several consulting assignments I've undertaken, I've known that the client would experience short term costs and pain resulting from implementing the changes I'd recommended. In one case the exco was split in terms of the changes to be made. In another the CEO who was hesitant to change was overruled by the Board, in still another the CEO who was initially resistant to change, made the changes necessary over time. In all three cases the outcome was positive, but it took time to show. So, in this sense a consultant should always be a change agent – but the change itself is not always welcome, at least initially. It takes conviction, experience, diplomacy, and character to be a change agent.

Consulting for change is also a process. It always starts with diagnosis, where are we now? Research and listening. Then there is nearly always the question of where should we be? Opportunity search. Then the question how are we going to get there? The three most important questions in strategic business planning are key to almost every consulting assignment.

Even within financial service providers, it is possible to create a project management division which provides levels of consulting style services. The challenge in an internal department is to replicate the experience and exposure of some external consultants.

It helps to think as an institution where can consultants be valuable? In my view:

- a) Where we need to understand: When it is not easy to take time to step back.
- b) Where we need to facilitate a sharing process: A third party can make this easier.
- c) Where we need an objective opinion: Where management and boards are conflicted.

- d) Where we need exposure and experience: Where we are moving out of our comfort zone.
- e) Where we need a fresh pair of eyes: Where new solutions are required.
- f) Where we are confused or inexperienced: We don't know what we need to know.
- g) Where we need to grow internal capacity: Through training and consultancy.

So, if you are experiencing any of these needs. Think about hiring a consultant. At the same time, seek ways to objectively measure the performance of the consultancy. How did we respond? How did we change?

At the same time, this blog also explains why it is not easy to become a successful consultant. Clients are hiring you for your skills, but as much as that, they are hiring you for your qualities, your experience, and your exposure. This can take years to develop.

If this reflection speaks to you... speak to me so that we can inspire change, together.

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