



Rasputin for Hire: An Inside Look at Management Consulting Between Jobs or as a Second Career

Michael A. Goodman (Dialogue Press, Westport, CT; 2004; ISBN 0-9702088-1-2) \$19.95

Inside the Minds: Leading Consultants

Frank Rooney, et al. (Aspartore Books, 2001; ISBN 1-58762-059-6) \$27.95

McKinsey's Marvin Bower: Vision, Leadership, and the Creation of Management Consulting

Elizabeth Hass Edersheim (Wiley, Hoboken, NJ; 2004; ISBN 0-471-65285-7) \$29.95

REVIEWED BY FIONA CZERNIAWSKA

Jack Welch, Sam Walton, Rupert Murdoch . . . The shelves of bookstores are sagging under the weight of celebrity business autobiographies. Heaven help us: you can even buy *Go: An Airline Adventure*.

But where are the lions of the consulting industry? There's certainly no shortage of good stories to tell; after all, we could have been treated to Rajat

Gupta's *McKinsey in the Era of Enron* or Doug McCracken's *Deloitte to Braxton and Back Again*. The possibilities are endless, so why the deafening silence?

Michael A. Goodman, author of *Rasputin for Hire*—an entertaining if not exactly profound look at consulting as a career—would probably say it is because the role of the consultant is to advise, not to lead. Rasputin was, of course, a power behind the throne, not on it: “the Tsarina sought his advice on how to run, whom to trust, or how to handle specific problems. She wanted his advice and guidance.”

It's not just the traditional, advisory function of a consultant that causes a low profile, but also the danger of hubris. In Rasputin's case, for example, things started going horribly wrong—and we're talking about ignominious death here, not just a consulting project off the rails—when Rasputin in effect went public. *Rasputin for Hire* reprises the monk's story in that of Greg, a latter-day consultant. Goodman writes that Greg's success with clients provoked envy among his colleagues: “They were constantly being compared to the ‘brilliant consultant’ and coming up second best. They had to find a way to remove him or they'd live in his shadow forever [and] came up with a plan, arranging to give Greg an impor-

tant assignment that no consultant possibly could deliver. When he failed, they used it as proof that ‘the magic was gone’ and Greg was back on the street. . . . From a career standpoint he was finished. No client would hire the high-profile consultant who lost his touch and failed.” In an industry where collegiate culture remains strong, there's a tension between the desire of individuals to promote themselves and the need for a firm to ensure it's not overly dependent on a small number of star performers. Puffing up your personal brand provokes criticism from your peers and invites failure. Thus, the greats of our business are largely unknown outside their small circle of colleagues and clients.

Inside the Minds suggests a third reason for the dearth of blockbuster consulting bios—that consultants are too busy focusing on their clients to spend time building up their reputations. Part of a series subtitled *Real World Intelligence from Industry Leaders*, this book is a collection of essays written by senior figures in major consulting firms. It offers much sound common sense but little rocket science. For example: “The art [of consulting] is really about both good listening and having a point of view on what to do and how to do it,” writes Frank Rooney, General

Manager of IBM's Business Innovation Services.

For a book that aims to paint a broad-brush picture of the consulting industry from the perspective of leaders, there's surprisingly little said on the subject of leadership. From what there is, we can infer that the leaders of consulting firms should: have "commitment to and conviction in the direction you're taking your company in" (David Frigstad, Frost & Sullivan); be "servant leaders [doing] everything they can to ensure the success of their organization"; and be able "to earn the respect of their employees and provide an environment that fosters every individual's growth" (John C McAuliffe, General Physics Corporation). Only Pamela McNamara at A.D. Little exhibits some recognition that leading consultants do not necessarily make effective leaders: "Applying our own insights and experience to ourselves, however, is easier said than done for organizations more accustomed to dispensing advice than receiving it." Consulting firms, she believes, have an "inherently outward professional focus" that makes them reluctant to concentrate on internal issues. That includes leadership development in most firms, and reputation-building for individuals.

If Rasputin is history's reputation *noir*, then Marvin Bower is consulting's *éminence grise*. Bower epitomizes someone who wielded unofficial power through others, often privately, even secretly. Even so, he's perhaps the most famous "lion" the consulting industry has produced.

McKinsey's *Marvin Bower* is undoubtedly a labor of love, undertaken by someone who knew Bower as a friend and colleague; it is meticulously researched and engagingly written. Bower joined McKinsey in 1933, when it was "a nearly defunct accounting and engineering firm," and when he formally retired in 1992, the firm employed about 2,500 consultants. There's no

question that Bower fitted, indeed exceeded, the model of leadership suggested by the leading consultants of *Inside the Minds*. He believed that McKinsey's reputation would come from "putting client interest first, conducting themselves ethically at all times, only taking on work where they knew they could provide true value, and maintaining their independence by always telling the truth." Pursuing his commitment to work only for chief executives—"the integrative force in organizations"—he turned down work from presidents of business. He refused to work for Howard Hughes because he didn't agree that the problem highlighted by Hughes was the most pressing one facing his business. Rather than take the firm public (as Booz-Allen & Hamilton had done in 1970), he sold his stock back to the partnership at its book value: "My purpose," he said later, "was to establish a firm that would live on after me."

In a 1953 presentation, he said: "We are what we speak—it defines us—it is our image. . . . We are management consultants only. We are not managers, promoters, or constructors." It was always "we" with Bower, never "I"; he even spoke of the firm as having a personality into which the egos of individual partners were subsumed. Yet he was highly influential: Faced with a problem, Edersheim—like many others who remember Bower—still asks herself what Bower would do in those circumstances. Outside McKinsey, Bower's impact has been, if anything, even more profound. We can trace back to him the way in which the consulting industry, in contrast to other professions, evolved around professional firms, rather than around individual professionals. Of course, the irony here is that the well-known and very influential Bower himself resisted all attempts at a personality cult, famously refusing to change the name of McKinsey & Co. because he didn't want to give clients an incentive to demand his input, rather than his

colleagues'. Even so, here is one leader in management consulting about whom we have a book.

But hang on, I hear you say; what about the likes of Michael Hammer or Jim Collins? Surely gurus like these are the de facto leaders of today's consulting industry? Yes and no. There's no question that such figures provide "thought leadership"—what they say attracts the attention of clients and provides a launching pad for consulting services. But that doesn't necessarily equate to people or moral leadership. While their ideas may create entire consulting markets, they are rarely the ones to implement their ideas. They don't deliver in the same way or the same thing as management consultants do.

And delivery is important. Clients want leadership from consultants. They want them to stand up and be accountable for the results of their ideas. Obviously, this is important if you're delivering a high-profile, multimillion-dollar new system or engaged in the transformation of an entire enterprise, but I'd argue it's equally true for smaller, advisory projects. Clients want consultants to lead their teams, however small, not just stand preaching, hedging, avoiding commitment, and equivocating on the sidelines. They want thought leadership but also tangible and measurable returns from that.

By that measure, many of the thought leaders—who do have best-selling books and appear to be the lions of the industry—are not actually management consultants. They don't really consult with clients so much as preach to them, lecture them, and speak to them in groups. They deliver monologues, not the dialogical work that separates true consulting from public speaking and writing.

So, there are good, laudable reasons why our stores are not stacked with the biographies of leading consultants—their advisory role, the collegiate atmospheres, the primary focus on clients, the

very nature of professional consulting firms, and the distinction between those who teach and those who consult.

But (and isn't there always a but . . .) I'm left wondering whether this modest, inclusive approach is appropriate to all parts of the consulting industry today. The advisory work that continues to be McKinsey's *raison d'être* today is only part of what consultants do. When it comes to systems implementation, driving costs out of a complex supply chain, or helping an organization outsource a business process, clients may need more in the way of overt leadership. They may need consultants with a vision and an ability to move heaven and earth to achieve it.

Modesty may have gotten the consulting industry to where it is today, but surely we need lions to take us where we have to go tomorrow.

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