



THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time

Martin Kihn (Warner Business Books, New York; 2005; ISBN 0-446-57656-5) \$24.95

Rip Off! The Scandalous Inside Story of the Management Consulting Money Machine

David Craig (Original Book Company, London; 2005; ISBN 1-872188-06-0) \$21.85

The Quintessential Guide to Using Consultants

David Zahn (HRD Press, Amherst, MA; 2004; ISBN 0-87425-794-8) \$24.95

Consultants and Advisers: A Best Practice Guide to Choosing, Using, and Getting Good Value

Harold Lewis (Kogan Page, London; 2004; ISBN 0-7494-4136-4) \$45

REVIEWED BY FIONA CZERNIAWSKA

A couple of years ago, when I wrote a report on the impact Enron might have on the consulting industry, I was

struck by clients' reactions. Consulting is different from auditing, we all agreed, because no one is required to hire a consultant; it is a discretionary expense. I asked who would be to blame if a large-scale consulting project collapsed in a highly visible, public fashion: the client or the consultant? The knee-jerk reaction would be to blame the consultant—but not a bit of it. Almost everyone argued that it is the client's responsibility to decide when and how to use consultants. Where they did feel more exposed was in the amount of information they had: the caveat emptor philosophy works well only where buyers can make an informed choice.

How clients view the consulting industry—the information they have at their disposal and the extent to which consultants educate clients about consulting—isn't just a question of reputation and winning pitches but a vitally important part of enabling clients to do their job, to make informed and intelligent choices.

Most books on consulting by consultants that are aimed at nonconsultants fall into one of two categories: revelations of celebrity-style bad behavior; and solid, practical guides to working with consultants. As practicing consultants, we'd naturally vilify the

former and extol the latter. But perhaps the situation is a bit more complicated.

Not many books on consulting can boast an Emmy-nominated comedy writer, but that makes Martin Kihn's *House of Lies* a thoroughly lively and entertaining read. It's a bit of a guilty pleasure, like reading Harry Potter on the subway before it became fashionable for adults, but along the way Kihn delivers some scarily pointed comments. He notes, for example, "the brutal slap of 'passive conformity' in the professional services firm" and people's sense of helplessness when the firm's management ordered them to cut staff. He's merciless when it comes to the pointless team-building exercises that so many companies indulge in: "As you pack up the boards and disassemble the web of pain, you find yourself working behind the junior khaki man . . . and you venture: 'so what were we supposed to learn from this?' It was now a pile of aluminium poles and a mess of mesh in the dirt. 'I don't know,' he says not thoughtfully. 'I think you're supposed to tell us.'" Other points are pure entertainment: The odds of becoming a McKinsey partner: 488 billion to 1, roughly 1,000 times less likely than an extraterrestrial invasion before 2097.

In such circumstances, it seems churlish to complain we don't learn anything either. But it's true that clients, while undoubtedly getting a frisson of excitement from watching those manipulative consultants swallow their own medicine, won't be any better prepared by that to use consultants effectively.

David Craig (*Rip Off!*) does not have an award for comedy, and it shows. "I spent the last 10 years of my career collecting material for this book," he says. "This is not a book written in anger by someone who failed." That defensiveness is understandable as it becomes clear that *Rip Off!* is a relentless and occasionally unhinged diatribe about consultants, written by someone who, while revolted by the "money machine" he saw around him, was apparently not revolted enough to turn down the money he personally made from it. Indeed, the transparency he advocates isn't particularly obvious here: he doesn't name the firm he worked for; he doesn't even use his own name (ironically, it's Neil Glass).

Rip Off! purports to hold a mirror up to the consulting industry: more accurately, it extrapolates from some rather limited and clearly unpleasant experience in order to present a distorted picture of the industry as a whole. Many of the criticisms he makes could justifiably be leveled at the consulting industry of five years ago, puffed up by the dot-com bubble, not at the sober and serious business it has become since. Reengineering was a fad? Well, that's not a particularly original statement, nor does it do much to explain why clients would fall for it or whether the same boom-to-bust trajectory would apply today.

Rip Off! sees the consulting firm as the root of all evil. While the growth imperatives espoused by many consulting firms should rightly be the cause for debate, laying all the blame at the consultants' door is disingenuous at best;

at worst, it's dangerously misleading. As the clients I talked to about Enron understood, clients also have a responsibility to make consulting a success.

That's certainly the starting point of David Zahn's book, *The Quintessential Guide to Using Consultants*. He says: "projects that go over budget, deliver poor results, and lead to less-than-satisfactory feelings about the experience are as much a responsibility of the client as the consultant." Zahn has plenty of good points to make here; he also refreshes some well-established parallels—such as the consultant-as-general-physician—by expanding on their practical implications. All told, the first half of the book, which offers guidance on when to use consultants and how to choose between them, provides an admirably clear starting point. Less useful are the later sections, which look at how best to manage ongoing consulting projects—partly because much of what is offered is simply good project management, and there is not enough discussion of the differences in managing outside advisors.

In *Consultants and Advisers*, Harold Lewis takes us through similar ground: handy checklists and sound advice aimed at the first-time buyer of consultants rather than the more experienced, sophisticated purchaser. Again, most of the advice is focused on how to hire consultants.

I'd be the first to accept that many of the problems that arise during consulting projects have their roots in the way clients think (and don't think) about why they might benefit from having consultants' input and what kind of firm they need. But surely we should also be trying to educate clients about what actually happens during projects.

Perhaps the problem lies in the nature of consulting itself. If only all consulting projects were as neat and tidy as they appear to be on the pages of Zahn's and Lewis's books! When talk-

ing about how best to maximize the results of a consulting engagement, Zahn reasonably suggests three things clients should do: assume control of the project, do not become dependent on the consultants, and spread the word internally when a project has gone well so that everyone can learn from it.

So why are there still problems? The reality of consulting is far messier and more complex than clean-cut guides to using consultants suggest. It is misleading to present consulting as an entirely predictable activity, in which even changes are controlled. It is surely just as dangerous to present clients with a simple checklist as it is to write a kiss-and-tell-all story of consulting.

None of the books reviewed here holds up a mirror to the real challenge of consulting for clients, which is knowing how to react to change and how to put things right when they go wrong.

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