



## CONSULTANT: GOOD CONSULTING FIRM: BAD

**G**ood intentions: they're what the road to hell is famously paved with. But what does it mean when you go into a client organization and say, I'm here to help? Who is making what promises, and who does the client hold responsible for keeping them? The consultant? Consulting firm? Both?

Clients view consulting relationships in two distinct ways: the personal interaction they have with the consultants (the individuals), and the results delivered (the promises that consultants make).

As an industry, we tend to think about the former more than the latter. Ask any consultant or client manager how they view their client-consultant relationships, and they will almost always begin at the most personal level. If the project went well, it was because those involved were "good" consultants; if it went badly, it was because they were "bad." The better the people, the better the project; the better the project, the better the people.

Clients believe that good consultants are knowledgeable, dedicated, honest, and able to engage with people on the client side. You could sum up the attributes of a good consultant as different, but the same. Different in that they have to bring something specific to a client, typically in-depth expertise in a field with which a client is

unfamiliar. But the same in that consultants also need to be able to work closely with clients; they all need to be part of the same, seamless team if they are to add value.

But what of the promises these people make? "The team were complete all-rounders, working with us and our customers and delivering brilliantly in both arenas. Their attitude is hungry, they are ambitious, and they deliver beyond our expectations every time." How are those expectations set, and how do firms exceed them?

### Promises, Promises

Every consulting project has promises—expectations—embedded within it: they may be small or large, explicit or implicit, but they are there nonetheless. Perhaps the single most important thing consultants do is keep their promises.

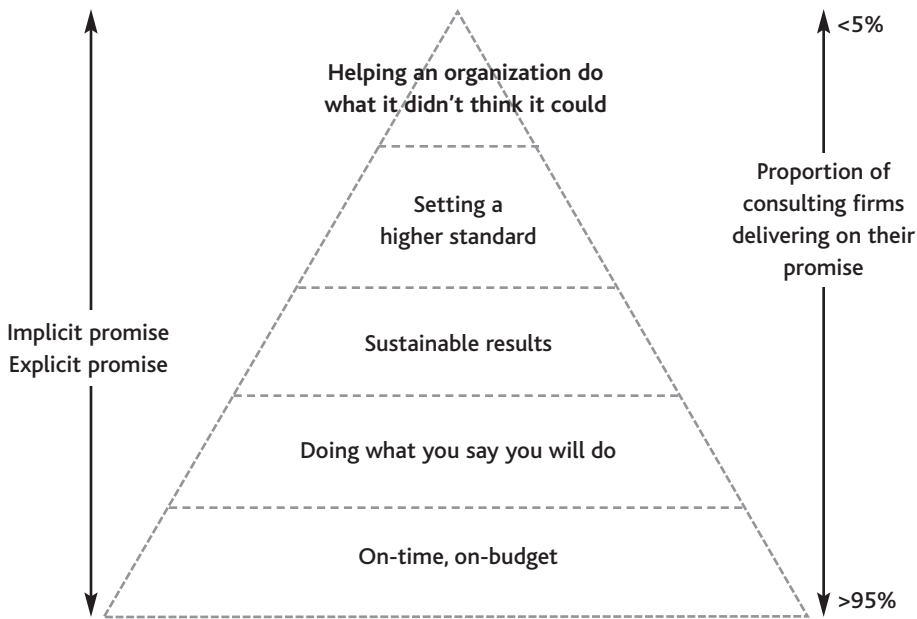
The promise that all consulting firms make—and most keep—concerns time and money. Even where a consulting firm is charging by the day, there will be a budget for the work and a completion date. But most consulting work is now done on a fixed-time basis, so the most explicit promise a consulting firm makes is to complete the specified piece of work within the stipulated time frame and for the agreed sum. "This highly ambitious project

was managed on time and within budget," said one satisfied client. "The implementation was a 100% success."

Going further up the "promise pyramid" (see Figure 1), clients expect consultants to do what they said they were going to do—implement a new IT system, coach a group of staff, or analyze a market. Such promises may relate to inputs ("We'll run half a dozen brainstorming sessions for your executive team"), outputs ("We'll analyze your options for entering the Asia-Pacific market and report back in a month"), or business outcomes ("We'll improve your time-to-market"). They may be more or less ambitious: but they will be what the consulting firm has stated them to be. "Put simply, the consultants came in, stated what they would do, and then did it," said one client.

On-time/on-budget delivery and doing what they say they will do are promises that clients expect consulting firms to deliver; such promises are almost always explicit, embedded in the terms of reference and contract. But on top of these there is a promise that clients hope will be achieved—that the positive results of a project will be sustained; that the benefits, once delivered, will remain with the organization long after the consultants have left. This is something that consulting firms can rarely make explicit:

FIGURE 1. The Promise Pyramid



too many variables exist to be able to say with certainty that their recommendations will stand the test of time or that an application they have installed will be deployed effectively by its users. Both client and consultant may strive to achieve this, but neither side can guarantee the result.

Not surprisingly, few consulting firms make such promises explicit: they represent the aspiration rather than the immediate goal. That being said, where the hope is realized, clients are unstinting in their praise. “The transformation has been just phenomenal,” said one. “To change a business of this size at the speed it happened and to help us to deliver a dramatic improvement in financial performance is an incredible success story. We are now well positioned to continue to grow the business.” “The consultants’ analysis has provided us with a competitive advantage because it has allowed us to compete in the market at prices of up to 30% less than before while still maintaining our margins,” said another. “In monetary terms, we will have earned more than 100 times in increased income than we paid out to the consultants in fees.”

Beyond the *hoped-for promises* consultants make, there are other *potential promises*. These are almost entirely unwritten; they are results a consulting firm may be able to deliver above and beyond a client’s expectations. Indeed, it is these potential promises that clients talk about when they say a consulting firm has exceeded their expectations.

*Potential promises* fall into two groups.

First, by bringing in consultants it may be possible to raise the standard of thinking and working in a given organization. This may seem outrageously arrogant to suggest: after all, most managers in client organizations are thoroughly experienced and have as many business qualifications as the consultants who work with them. But remember that we are talking about good consulting here, not just the workaday standard. Good consulting firms, which set great store over the quality of work they do, can change how client managers see themselves and what they expect from their own staff. “The consultants said, ‘let’s not settle for less; let’s go for something better,’” recalled one client. “Looking

back, that was the right thing to do.” Said another: “The success of this program was increased by the way in which we could work closely with the consultants. It has felt ‘joined-up,’ not only in terms of delivery but also in relation to a shared passion for excellence. It’s been refreshing to work with professionals who are clearly in touch with the demands of the business and able to add real value.”

The second potential promise is much greater in scale and scope. Sometimes—and if we are honest, it really is in a very small number of occasions—consultants can do something an organization has thought impossible. “We wouldn’t be where we are today,” is typically how clients see this. “The consulting team recognized our strengths and challenged us to achieve more than many of our managers would have thought possible. They have helped our business release valuable capacity and delivered an approach to performance management that will support our future business growth,” said one client. “I can hardly believe it: we’ve been involved in this program for less than two months, and our average sales value has already increased by almost a third,” said another.

## Blame

If people and promises are the two cornerstones of the way in which clients view their relationship with consultants, what is it that goes wrong?

Unsurprisingly, clients cite poor-quality consultants first. “Bad consultants are those who trot out platitudes and charge a lot,” was how one manager put it. “They offer little insight and add nothing new.” “They only do what they’re told to do,” complained another. “There’s no leadership.” Yet others talked of the arrogance that consultants so easily slip into: “They think they are the sole owners of intellect in their area; they can’t relate to other people.” “A bad consultant is

someone who either doesn't listen or pretends to listen while coming up with a prepackaged solution." And from the people, clients move quickly on to talk about the broken promises. "A bad consulting firm is one that sells you a project with one set of people but tries to deliver with another. You expect the organ grinder but get the monkey." "They promise the earth and can't deliver; they make powerful presentations but have no substance."

The striking thing about these comments is how quickly an unhappy client moves from blaming individual consultants to blaming the consulting firm that supplied them. That is not unreasonable: it is the consulting firm, after all, that is providing the service. It is the consulting firm that makes the promises in their sales pitch. It is the consulting firm that offers people it has prequalified.

But it is noticeable how the same connection is rarely made when it comes to good work: there, it is the good consultant who gets all the credit, not the consulting firm. Also worth noting is the way in which dissatisfied clients often criticize the consultants who work for them for putting their firm's interests before those of their clients. According to one manager, a good consultant "will always act in our best interests, rather than imposing an overused solution or looking

for future business and sales." By contrast, bad consultants "aim to get as much money as possible out of us in the short term at the expense of any long-term relationship." From a client's point of view, individual consultants add value because they bring specific expertise, and this expertise allows them to make good their promises. "The key thing is the people in the firm assigned to the project. The consultants are more important than who they work for." Consulting firms only get in the way of this, putting pressure on consultants to divide their work between other clients or to look for additional sales opportunities.

So here's the challenge: if we as an industry don't start defending and demonstrating the role that the consulting firm has to play in keeping its promises—in finding and fielding high-caliber people, in providing the environment and infrastructure that allows those people to do their job well—then clients will start to question why we bother having consulting firms at all. ■

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