

THE CHAMELEON CONSULTANT

Culturally Intelligent Consultancy

Andrew Holmes
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Recent obituaries for Martin Bower have highlighted how pivotal the 1930s were in the evolution of today's consulting industry. Bower, along with other consulting grandees of the period, chose to professionalise the collective entity – 'the firm' – rather than the individuals who worked within it. Unlike, say, the legal or medical professions, the consulting industry saw corporate professionalism take precedence over individual certification.

But the strategy has always been problematic. Consulting is an axiomatic people business, with firms' brands far more dependent on the individuals who sell and deliver consulting engagements than on multi-million dollar advertising campaigns. Culture is key: professional values at a corporate level create a culture which encourages and rewards professional behaviour at the client coal face. It's strange, therefore, that, with so many books on how to be a successful consultant, so few focus on the impact of culture (the client's and the consultant's).

The Chameleon Consultant is dedicated to 'those consultants who know that success depends on more than just raw intellect'. Written by Andrew Holmes, a director at PwC, its premise is that a 'one size fits all' approach to consulting is unlikely to work, and that consultants who are able to adapt their behaviour and ways of working to those of their client are more likely to win their clients' trust and so succeed. Consulting firms have long recognised that thought leadership is only one component of

good consulting: equally important are the softer skills that enable a consultant to work well with a client on an emotional, as well as rational level. But consultants, trained in NLP and the precepts of Daniel Goleman's 'emotional intelligence' are still missing a trick – an awareness of the cultural context in which their work takes place. 'The reasonable consultant adapts himself to the client; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the client to him', says Holmes, before going on to look at culture from three different perspectives: the foundations of cultural intelligence, the application of consulting intelligence in consulting engagements and what it means to be a culturally intelligent consulting firm.

It is a well researched and thoughtful book that's refreshingly free of the management jargon that bedevils so many consultant-heal-thyself books. Holmes provides practical tools both for gauging the salient characteristics of both clients' and consultants' organisational culture and for mapping the two cultures against each other; he also raises questions about what happens when cultures are mismatched, when clients and consultants clash, rather than collaborate.

Where the book is less successful is making the leap between organisational theory and consulting practice. According to Holmes, the 'culturally intelligent account manager' (for example) will understand and be sensitive to different client cultures, and will match his sales process to them.

This is surely what a good account manager has always done, albeit unconsciously. Similarly, Holmes is surely right to point out that consultancy 'is not purely about intelligence or selling in intelligent consultants to solve client problems. It has much to do with the way consultants interact with their clients, which includes how they gain commitment, manage issues as they arise, and maintain productive working and professional relationships.'

The problem is that cultural intelligence is much harder to achieve in reality than it looks on paper. Being able to categorise an organisation as networked, communal, fragmented and mercenary is undoubtedly a useful tool in some hands, but is unlikely to sway the behaviour of those fools who perennially rush in where their more culturally sensitive colleagues fear to tread. Isn't teaching someone to be aware of organisational culture as much of a contradiction as ordering them to be empowered? Culture, like consulting brands, is created bottom-up – through the behaviour of employees – as much as top-down. To be fair, Holmes acknowledges that this isn't easy, but there's a having-your-cake-and-eating-it feel, particularly to the final section of the book where he discusses how his ideas may be implemented in a consulting firm. 'Taken seriously', he asserts, 'cultural intelligence provides the basis of competitive advantage for those consultants that take its philosophies to heart.' Unfortunately, he can't actually tell us how to do it.

Reviewed by Fiona Czerniawska.