

Why Consultants Revise Endlessly

Idea In Short

Consulting revisions stem from six forces: early prototyping, on-the-job learning, internal review cycles, diverse audiences, harmonization needs, and over-eagerness. Embrace the process but manage it with structure and humility.

Consultants Revise Relentlessly

The end product of consulting tends to be high quality because smart people spend enormous time on it. Looking at file names on a laptop reveals the revision culture. Files with titles like phase 1 with date, time, and time zone suggest obsessive version control. Files labeled final version 3 raise an obvious question. If it was final, why is there a third revision?

A cynic might ask why there are so many revisions. Are consultants not supremely good at judging project scope? Are they not data-driven and confident in their answers? Are they not excellent at PowerPoint and graphs? The reality is that revisions serve a purpose. Six forces drive them, and understanding each one helps consultants manage the process rather than suffer through it.

Early Prototyping Drives Iteration

It will be a strange day when people call consultants innovative, but one thing they do well is fast and early prototyping. Management consulting is based on testing hypotheses and quickly narrowing down the answer. It is not uncommon to start putting together a storyboard a month before the deadline. At this point it is just a skeleton, mostly blank pages with placeholder titles. It grows daily and starts to take on a life of its own.

Storyboarding is a critical initial step in consulting engagements. Teams sketch out the narrative structure early, checking logic flow and organizing the team before detailed slide production begins. The storyboard serves as the headlines of the presentation, summarizing anticipated results from work streams or the entire study. As the project progresses and

findings emerge, the storyboard evolves continuously 1.

Learning on the Job Creates Revisions

Every project includes novices, whether analysts with undergraduate degrees or senior consultants with MBAs. They may have analytical skills and business polish, but most real consulting learning happens on the job. Few people can put together a consulting presentation from scratch. It is a learned skill.

Good consultants can visually represent what you want to say on a PowerPoint slide in a beautifully structured and persuasive way. Analysts cannot learn this in a vacuum. It requires experimentation and occasional failure. On-the-job training is good news for the analyst learning skills. It is a necessary cost for the senior manager who reviews, edits, and teaches newcomers how to work. Many managers have secretly wished they had more seasoned consultants on the team.

Internal Review Cycles Multiply Edits

It is natural for managers to want to review work product. You can call it quality assurance or simply checking up. A consulting project is no different from any other professional service. The review chain runs from consultant to manager to senior manager to partner.

The staffing leverage model means lots of consultant time and less partner time. The consultant is staffed full-time, typically Monday through Thursday. The senior manager and partner are there some of the time. As the due date approaches, the deliverable, whether an Excel model, PowerPoint deck, or workshop preparation, gets lots of review and scrutiny. Lots of revisions happen late at night. The pyramid principle and structured storytelling frameworks help manage this by ensuring each slide has a clear, single message that reviewers can evaluate quickly 2.

Diverse Client Audiences Demand Versions

What you present to your day-to-day client counterpart differs from what you present to the executive sponsor or steering committee. Each audience and venue require a slightly different presentation. In one poorly scoped project, the final presentation was delivered four times to different audiences. Sometimes it was a three-hour presentation. Other times

only 45 minutes were available. Different versions, different people, different purposes.

Fortunately, you can usually repurpose 80 percent of the material and simply change the titles and order of slides. Good presentations should be stand-alone documents. If someone picked up your slides without context, could they understand the content, context, and main points? This test forces clarity and reduces the need for entirely new versions.

Harmonizing Work Streams Takes Effort

Perhaps the biggest reason for revisions is the need to harmonize ideas, work streams, writing styles, numbers, and words. Ideally, the consultant's recommendation is compelling, credible, and clear. It has a strong logical narrative, is backed by data and analysis, and leaves the client with a clear idea of what to do next. It is internally consistent and looks like the same person authored it from start to finish.

In reality, it is a bit of sausage-making. There are multiple authors, multiple work streams, multiple sources of data, and sometimes multiple opinions. Bruce Tuckman studied group dynamics in the 1960s and described group development in four stages that apply directly to developing deliverables 3.

Tuckman's Stages in Deliverable Development

Forming is the first stage. Individuals work largely independently with cautious respect for each other's space. In a consulting context, this is when team members work on their assigned work streams in isolation. Progress appears steady but coordination is minimal.

Storming follows. Different opinions vie for attention. Lots of discussion and even disagreement occur. Individuals might feel setback and the slow grind of consensus building. Teams that trust and compromise benefit. In consulting projects, this is where work streams collide. The market analysis says one thing, the financial model says another, and the competitive benchmarking tells a third story. Harmonizing these into one narrative requires difficult conversations.

Norming comes next. Things start settling down. Agreement emerges on the path forward. Group productivity rises. The deliverable starts to look coherent as the team aligns on the core message and supporting evidence. Individual work streams merge into a unified

presentation.

Performing is the final stage. Things are going well. There is collaboration and synergy. The deliverable is really improving because individual and group sections work together. The presentation reads as if one person wrote it from start to finish. This is the goal state.

When Projects Stall in Storming

Over beers, any consultant can tell you nightmare stories where projects essentially got stuck in the storming phase. People disagreeing or being petty. Someone eventually lays down the law. I know you disagree with the approach, but I am managing this project and this is how we are going to do it. More dictator than leader.

The most painful revision cycles occur when teams cannot escape storming. Multiple versions circulate. No one agrees on the core message. The senior manager overrides the consultant. The partner overrides the senior manager. The client changes their mind. Each iteration generates new versions and new frustration.

Over-Eagerness and Type A Personalities

Many consultants are Type A, ambitious, opinionated, and a little bit on the control-freak side. They like to win. They like their clients to win. They are confident that their approach to the structure of the presentation, or even the wording on a specific page, is better. If everyone would just listen, the presentation would be 100 percent better.

The sanity check is that managers should probably be more humble, listen more, and major in the majors while minoring in the minors. Is the order of bullets on that slide really a deal-breaker? Would that time be better spent teaching the analyst something new? Just joking. It matters.

Communication Is the Core

Ben and Jerry's co-founders discussed their 30-plus year working relationship in Fortune magazine. Jerry Greenfield offered simple wisdom. Their basic agreement was that the person who felt more strongly about the particular issue got their way. This principle applies directly to consulting revisions.

Gathering broad sources of information, focusing attention, listening deliberately, selling ideas to senior managers and partners, structuring presentations for easy comprehension, and ultimately giving clients the confidence to take action based on your recommendation. All those things make consulting challenging, fun, collaborative, and full of revisions.

- 1FIRMSconsulting
- 2The Analyst Academy
- 3Wikipedia

Summary

Revisions are not a flaw in consulting. They are the process. Early prototyping, learning, review cycles, audience adaptation, harmonization, and ambition all drive iterations. Embrace the sausage-making while keeping your ego in check.