

Survive the Long Middle

Idea In Short

Survive the long middle by working the plan, storyboarding early, prioritizing the critical path, asking for help, building relational equity, pre-selling ideas through nemawashi, and never taking your foot off the gas.

Work the Smart and Well-Scoped Plan

Build on the smart planning you have already done. If you have a good working rapport with the client and have listened closely, you should have a better-than-average diagnosis of the problems, the environment, and the next steps. This is usually embedded in the statement of work and reiterated through executive status reports. The simplest advice is often the hardest to follow: read what you said you would do.

The plan is your compass during the long middle. When fatigue sets in and the team loses focus, returning to the original scope and milestones provides clarity. Do not assume the plan is outdated just because the middle feels different from the beginning. Adjust where necessary, but trust the framework you built during the kickoff.

Work Backwards From Interim Deliverables

Deliverables are the finished goods that consultants produce. Sometimes it is a presentation, an Excel model, a series of recommendations, or a workshop. These are the outputs the client is paying money to receive. If the final product is due, what series of steps are needed to make it happen? Need to bake a cake by 3 p.m.? It better be in the oven by 2 p.m., and you better have the ingredients and a kitchen by 1 p.m.

There are deliverables due every week. It is not just the big presentation in the boardroom in week 12. Executive status updates, draft presentations, storyboards, and initial analyses all count. Do not forget to take credit for the day-to-day work you are doing. Interim deliverables keep the client engaged and demonstrate progress during the phase where

progress feels slowest 1.

Storyboard Now

Consultants use PowerPoint to tell the project story. This is about smart structuring of the problem, sufficient use of logic and data, and prioritized storytelling. How would you explain this to your cousin? Can you make it simple enough to understand and persuasive enough to motivate action? Can you get the client to say that it makes sense and they want to proceed?

Start on paper. Storyboards are often written on blank pieces of paper or a whiteboard. Start with the titles. You should be able to read the titles in sequence and they should tell a story like scenes in a movie. The remainder of your project is to refine the narrative and back it up with analysis, case studies, and qualitative evidence. Storyboards also help disparate team members put something holistic together, serving as a sanity test to see if the parts sum up to a coherent whole.

Prioritize and Ask What Is Critical Path

Consultants use this to ask what is the most critical thing needed currently. What could derail the project or create massive delays if not addressed now? What is the one thing needed today? Project managers and engineers use this term to describe the longest time path to completion, a slightly different nuance. The concept helps teams focus on what truly matters amid competing demands.

Towards the end of the section of work, find the right time to think critically about the work. If you were the senior manager or client, what three to five difficult, slightly uncomfortable questions might come up? In war games, they call this the red-team exercise. At Bain, they call it the blue-team. Anticipating challenges before the final presentation saves you from embarrassment and strengthens your recommendations.

Ask for Help in a Smart Way

Do not be shy about gut-checking yourself and the project. Managers and clients want to know when obstacles are in the way of your progress that they can help with. For those executing the work, the wisdom and humility to ask for help when needed is essential. Ask

good questions. A career stopper is when you do not ask for help with something your manager could easily have solved, corrected, advised on, or saved you time.

The caveat is critical: come to your manager with potential solutions, not with problems. Consultants do not whine. They evaluate trade-offs and help clients make good decisions. Consultants are paid to worry. Presenting options with a recommendation signals maturity and builds trust with leadership.

Be Flexible and Good-Hearted

No matter how hard you work, you do not control the client's environment. Data collection can be late. There may be scope creep or random requests. People go on vacation. Computers crash. If you want to be a successful long-timer, be a bit zen about this work. Blindly saying yes all the time will get you in trouble.

Make relational deposits now. In preparation for the inevitable chaos, build up relational equity with the client, manager, and team members. Do the good work every day that builds trust. Put in the extra energy, time, and generosity now so you can take a withdrawal later with favors. When you need to ask for help with a tight deadline or an unusual request, the relational capital you have accumulated makes the ask far easier to grant.

Pilot, Test, Re-Test

Are there elements of your deliverable that can be field-tested now? You will never be 100 percent certain about your plans, so find smart ways to test them within your team, at the client, or through an online survey. Jim Collins calls it firing bullets first, then the cannonball 2. Get the client involved and stress-test your assumptions early.

No reason exists to put together an idealized recommendation that does not work in practice. Piloting surfaces implementation barriers while there is still time to adjust. A recommendation that survives real-world testing carries far more weight than one that exists only in theory. Clients respect consultants who validate their thinking rather than presenting untested ideas.

Quick Wins and Good News

Everyone gets a little tired in the middle of a project. We all could use bright news: costs saved, a recalcitrant stakeholder now on board. In client service, it is important not only to do good work but also to remind the client you are doing good work. Satisfaction equals perception minus expectation.

If you have good news, share it. You often work for the executive sponsor but spend most of your time with the project manager. Do not be shy about complimenting client-side people on the project who are doing great work. Chances are, they do not get enough compliments anyway. Recognizing others builds goodwill and strengthens the collaborative fabric of the engagement.

Nemawashi Now

It is never too early to start pre-selling your ideas. The Japanese have a business term called *nemawashi*, which loosely translated means loosening up the soil before you transplant a tree. Metaphorically, you are getting the audience or client's mind ready for your recommendation ³. Practically, you are running your ideas by stakeholders before the big meeting.

Tell them this is still a draft and you wanted to run the ideas by them. Ask whether they believe certain stakeholders will find the recommendation reasonable. Pre-selling prevents the worst outcome in consulting: presenting a recommendation to a surprised and hostile room. Consensus built quietly before the meeting becomes approval delivered confidently in the meeting.

Do the Work

It is easy to take your foot off the gas in this phase. Both you and the client are a little relaxed and satisfied. This is the time to drink the extra coffee, crank harder on the deliverables, make the extra phone call, and push to wow the client. The consultants who push hardest during the long middle are the ones who deliver exceptional results at the end.

The long middle is not glamorous. It is where the grunt work happens, where the data gets cleaned, where the analysis gets repeated until it is right. Embrace this phase as the crucible that separates good consultants from great ones. The discipline you maintain here determines the quality of what you present in the boardroom.

- 1Critical Path Method: Steps, Guide, and Examples
- 2Fire Bullets, Then Cannonballs
- 3Nemawashi

Summary

The long middle tests discipline. Work backwards from deliverables, storyboard on paper, ask for help with solutions not complaints, build relational deposits before you need them, and start pre-selling your ideas early. The consultants who push hardest in the middle are the ones who deliver at the end.