What Consultants Actually Do

Idea In Short

Consultants help executives make difficult decisions and implement change through strategy, culture and operations. They obsess over data, borrow client authority to influence, think like executives and convert stress into positive energy, all within a leverage model that rewards craftsmanship.

A Strange Breed Spanning Industries

Consultants span all industries, but ultimately they are in the business of helping executives make difficult decisions and implement change. The work is a combination of strategy, culture and operations, or head, heart and hand. The most important ingredient is leadership, which consultants cannot provide. Only clients can provide the why that motivates people into action.

This distinction matters. Consultants bring structure, data and methodologies, but they borrow authority rather than wield it. The client owns the decision and the consequence. The consultant's job is to make the right choice obvious and the implementation achievable, then step back.

Consultants Love Data

Clients struggle with data. They are like data hoarders who watch it pile up yet are afraid to confront it. The idea of big data is sometimes comical because most clients cannot deal with their small data. Sometimes you can just put the data into Excel and quickly make sense of it. As a beginning consultant, you had better be good with Excel and PowerPoint.

Consultants obsess about data because it is apolitical and provides credibility for recommendations. In Master of Business Administration [MBA] programs, everyone learned that averages are often the wrong answer. Consultants build Excel models to run what-if

scenarios and understand how accurate a set of assumptions will be. They are revision-crazy and have a serious fear of failure, which drives rigor.

Tools and Methodologies

Consultants have great tools and methodologies. Maturity models, evaluation frameworks, best practices, interviews, DMAIC, SIPOC, Poka-Yoke and Six Sigma fill the toolkit. Frameworks help you think through problems, but the crux of consulting is asking good questions. Who, what, why, when and where remain the foundation. Some of the basic tenets of supply chain, like Lean, apply to all industries.

The tools are means, not ends. A framework applied without understanding produces a deck full of boxes and no insight. The consultant who asks the sharp question and listens for the answer that does not quite fit is the one who finds the trade-off the client is not seeing.

The Influence Business

Consultants borrow authority from their clients to help make change happen. They make presentations but do not have the power, clients do. Projects can be short, yet consultants need to build rapport quickly. They build rapport with IT for the data, with executive assistants to schedule meetings and with stakeholders across the organization. Often the job is to nudge people toward decisions they already know are right. Consultants think, write, communicate, then repeat the process.

Thinking Like Executives

Good consultants think like executives. They read what executives read and find relevant surveys. They read Peter Drucker, understand management trends and think globally. They listen to relevant podcasts, TED talks and Stanford entrepreneur videos. Today there are Ivy League-level courses online for free. You can take accounting classes from Wharton with no degree but learn a great deal. Quora is a useful tool to find first-hand management experiences. 1

PowerPoint as the Lingua Franca

Consultants use PowerPoint daily. It starts with a strong understanding of the audience and

purpose. First, does the structure support the narrative? Second, do the slides themselves make sense on their own? Third, have you edited and put the finishing touches on the pages? Is the deliverable something you are proud of?

As with writing, brevity is best. Slides need a clear point and should not be ambiguous. Some of this is the logical structure of what you are saying, while other times it is how the facts are laid out on the page. A slide that requires explanation has already failed part of its job.

Intellectually Curious Insecure Overachievers

McKinsey's chairman once said the best candidates were insecure overachievers. The best consultants are obviously smart but also aware, fun and eager. They are fast learners who break problems down into mental lego pieces. You can apply consulting thinking to elections, college football, gift cards, the Olympics or the value of a life. 2

The fun part of consulting is tackling difficult problems. That is why firms use case interviews to test structured thinking. The method is rooted in hypotheses and the counter-intuitive practice of guessing your way to a solution. There is always a trade-off, an opportunity cost the client is not seeing, and it is the consultant's job to shed light on it.

Making Clients Successful

Sometimes the project scope is clear and sometimes it is not. Consultants often find smart ways to say no to clients for their own good. The work is not always what you planned in the proposal, and you have to adapt. Clients get caught up in bad corporate habits and inertia and lose effectiveness. Sometimes they hire consultants to be the bad guys.

Consultants never embarrass their clients. They allow clients to save face and find win-win solutions. Even while building rapport and being likable, consultants need to be themselves and be authentic. Authenticity builds the trust that makes hard messages land. 3

Consultants Get Lazy

Consultants have bad habits. They use jargon constantly. Sometimes they rely too much on previous examples and recycle materials. Clients will fire you if you get too lax, and then it is

resume time. Good consultants eagerly seek feedback to improve. As some say, you are only as good as your last project.

The danger of the leverage model is that recycled thinking compounds as it moves down the pyramid. A senior associate's framework reused by a junior analyst without context produces generic output. The discipline to refresh, customize and question assumptions is what separates the craftsman from the cog.

A Lifestyle and a Leverage Model

There are great things about the consulting lifestyle. It sounds glamorous with good pay, smart and amiable people, tough problems, good meals and travel. It is not all rainbows and ponies, though. Lots of late nights and weekend work come with the territory. Great consultants convert that stress into positive energy and live to fight another day.

Find good people to work with, people who pass the airport test. That means people you could spend eight or more hours stranded in an airport with and still enjoy. Find people you like working with, because the team is the experience.

Consulting is a leverage model. Younger, newer and cheaper consultants do work that can be billed out at higher rates. There are finders, the partners who find work, minders who farm the projects and grinders who grind out the analyses. The projects with the highest leverage tend to be information technology projects.

An Apprenticeship and a Team Sport

Consulting is a tough business with a high level of attrition. Learn as much as you can from managers. Do not wait until the year-end review to see how you are doing. Consultants get paid well, and clients want a good return on their money. The apprenticeship model means your growth depends on the people around you.

Ultimately, consulting is about people. Partners and principals carry the responsibility of building the team environment and culture. It is a can-do culture where consultants do not whine but come up with solutions. There are times when a flat democracy is right and everyone's voice should be heard, and other times when a dictatorship gets things done.

Innovation and Craftsmanship

Some of the most interesting business problems involve how smaller companies can scale quickly without losing their founder's mentality. Even if you are not a technology consultant, you must stay current on technology trends. Data does not always give you the answer. Sometimes it is an S-curve where the past does not predict the future. Find ways to be disruptive and innovate.

It is easy to attack complexity with complexity. It is difficult to attack complexity with simplicity. The consultant who masters the latter becomes the category of one that clients seek out. As John Updike wrote, any activity becomes creative when the doer cares about doing it right, or better. That is the consulting craft in a single sentence.

- 1Peter Drucker Quotes On Management And Innovation
- 2How McKinsey Changed Consulting And The Insecure Overachiever Profile
- 3Leading The Insecure Overachiever In Consulting

Summary

Consulting is a lifestyle built on data, influence, leverage and apprenticeship. Good consultants think like executives, communicate with brevity and stay intellectually curious. The craft rewards those who innovate, build trust and make clients successful while never embarrassing them.