Consultants as Marriage Counselors

Idea In Short

Accept that a third of consulting is corporate marriage counseling. Business units, regions and functions sub-optimize their pieces into collective chaos, and cross-functional tension gets arbitrated only at the top. Drive alignment through listening, pre-selling, win-wins and deliverables that make agreement easier than argument.

An Everyday Symptom

A recognizable scene sets the theme. A consultant interviews the pricing team and the sales leadership in the same week and discovers each holds a confident, detailed and entirely wrong model of what the other does all day. Neither side is lying and neither is lazy. They simply inhabit different systems, different meetings and different incentives, and the shared employer on their badges guarantees nothing about shared understanding. Multiply that pair across every function boundary in a global company and the counseling caseload writes itself.

Organizations Cannot Talk to Themselves

Ask any consultant and she will confirm that a good portion of her job is helping one part of the client organization talk to another part. Odd, and true. Outsiders assume Fortune 500 companies communicate effectively, and many times they simply do not. The environment guarantees it, as Thomas Friedman made abundantly clear: market forces and digitized information create a global free-for-all of competitive complexity, and any ten-billion-dollar company contains business units, regions and functions all fighting for customers and internal sponsors. Each group sub-optimizes its own little piece of the pie well, and the sum total is chaos. Bain's founder's mentality research names the mechanism: growth creates complexity, and complexity kills growth.1

Why the Right Hand Loses the Left

Intra-company confusion is surprisingly common, with one part of the company unaware or completely misinformed about another's activities, and the causes stack. Different data sets sit in unintegrated systems. Leadership and direction change excessively. Layers of management create mailmen of information, each handoff losing fidelity. Low-trust cultures over-rely on reports, documentation and approvals. Strings of acquisitions receive limited post-merger integration, and leadership recruited from outside or from competitors arrives without institutional memory.2 None of these causes is exotic, and together they sever the corporate corpus callosum.

Tension by Design, Bottleneck by Default

Organization design deliberately creates constructive tension, and rightly so. Nobody wants sales dictating all pricing decisions, or finance approving every small innovation investment, because a diversity of educated voices makes better decisions, as every student of groupthink knows.3 The design flaw appears in the resolution path. The tension lives at the functional level while arbitration happens only at the top, requiring a marketing chief and a finance chief in one room for decisions that should settle three layers down. Everything passes upward to the metaphorical corporate supreme court, and everything becomes a bureaucratic bottleneck.

A Third of the Job Is Counseling

Hence the half-joking, half-precise claim shared between consulting friends: a third of what consultants do is marriage counseling, driving alignment between parties who share a household and barely speak. The counseling docket is long. Surfacing internal best practices across divisions. Driving alignment on shared goals, outcomes and expectations. Getting cross-functional stakeholder buy-in. Analyzing the value chain and synchronizing complementary processes. Standardizing roles and responsibilities for job leveling. Running post-merger integration, conducting strategic planning, developing governance and operating models, casting vision and mission statements and cascading performance metrics into dashboards. The list could run pages, and every item shares one core: bringing different parts of the business together and getting agreement. Getting the two spouses talking.

The Unlicensed Counselor's Playbook

Twelve practices consistently bring client groups together. Get the client talking and working through their own issues, because owned conclusions outlast delivered ones. Listen first and understand, defying the assumption that consultants listen poorly. Be authentic and give clients a person to relate to. Aim explicitly at the client's success and say so. Document what you heard, structure it and collect feedback. Pre-sell your thinking ahead of time and separately with individuals, never springing conclusions cold. Assume positive intent, since consultants exist to create change. Find win-wins and promote them ruthlessly. Never fall into the trap of bad-mouthing the other team, which is simply stupid. Skip pointless meetings, doing the work instead and letting deliverables drive agreement. Use the power of awkward, deploying logic that makes the right thing obvious. Call in the big guns sparingly, letting the executive sponsor reinforce behaviors, and keep bringing people back to the vision, mission and purpose, rooting them in the why.

Reading the Room Before Counseling It

The counseling playbook works only after an honest diagnosis of the estrangement, and three questions map it quickly. Where does information actually die? Follow one decision through the organization and note the desk where context stops traveling, because that desk, not the org chart, marks the real fault line. Who benefits from the confusion? Misalignment usually has quiet beneficiaries, whether a function protecting budget or a leader protecting turf, and counseling that ignores them fails politely. What did the last three alignment attempts die of? Workshops, task forces and steering committees leave residue, and the failure pattern, usually sponsorship that evaporated or decisions that never bound anyone, tells the consultant which mechanism to avoid repeating. Diagnosis before therapy is as true for corporate marriages as for any other kind.

The Deliverable Is the Mediator

The through-line in all twelve is displacement: the document, the data and the shared goal absorb the conflict so the people can cooperate. A well-built deliverable argues on everyone's behalf, letting a divided room agree with the analysis rather than concede to a rival. That is why counseling-heavy engagements still produce artifacts, since alignment without a written record dissolves by the next reorganization. Whatever else changes in the profession, organizations will keep growing complexity faster than communication, and someone will keep getting paid to help the household talk. Fred and Ethel always need the counselor back eventually.

- 1Bain Founder's Mentality
- 2Organizational Structure
- 3Groupthink

Summary

Organizations struggle to talk to themselves, and complexity keeps making it worse. Consultants counsel the corporate marriage: surfacing best practices, aligning goals, standardizing roles and rooting everyone in the why. Listen first, pre-sell separately, never bad-mouth the other team and use awkward logic.