Teams: Great and Terrible

Idea In Short

Enter consulting teams with open eyes: you will meet teammates on day one, campaign for your own staffing, fight to roll off overlong projects, manage micro-managers, budget your social energy and learn even from anti-mentors. One test sorts all colleagues: do I like working with this person?

Not Always Rainbows and Ponies

Consulting is rightly celebrated as a team sport, and the celebration deserves caveats, because it is not always rainbows and cute ponies. Six realities shape the team experience, and knowing them in advance converts each from shock to manageable feature. The first is perpetual novelty: consulting means working with smart, diverse people who are rarely the same people twice. Large consultancies staff projects from all over the country, so outside the densest markets consultants fly or drive to clients and commonly meet teammates on the first day of the engagement, then must quickly size up everyone's strengths, personalities and ambitions, building trust and performing well together immediately.

The Staffing Beauty Pageant

The second reality is that nobody hands out dream assignments. Consulting firms are pools of talent and relationships, and you must be known for something, building a professional brand strong enough that people want you on their teams, with word-of-mouth marketing about your skills and attitude doing the recruiting. Wanting a project does not get you staffed on it; getting on the project you want is your own job, and Peter Drucker's classic guidance on managing oneself applies at full strength.1 The mechanics explain the haphazardness, since staffing mixes and matches four variables: availability, meaning not already on a project or vacation; level, from partner through consultant; experience with the type of work at hand; and geography, since someone closer reduces expenses. The result can feel like a perpetual beauty pageant, and the contestants who campaign do better than

those who wait.

Getting Stuck, and Managed Too Closely

The third reality inverts the second: sometimes the problem is staying, not joining. Operationally focused projects can run months or years, splendid revenue for the firm and genuinely necessary for clients with monster operational issues, and consultants can get stuck largely by accident, kept in place because the partner finds it convenient, the client likes the rapport and the work is going well. Convenience for the staffing manager is not the same as good outcomes for your development, and consultants are a high-maintenance lot, forever wanting onto a new project or off the current one, in the spirit of Groucho Marx's refusal to join any club that would accept him as a member.2 The fourth reality is micro-management, found in every organization: senior managers fiddling in details they should delegate. Jason Fried's talk on why work does not get done at work catalogs how disruptive meetings and managers are to real value-added flow, and while busy consulting teams see less of it, it exists.3

Managers Shape the Experience

Team leads hold most of the levers behind these six realities. They can open kickoffs with genuine introductions rather than workplan recitations, advocate for their people in the staffing pageant, watch for the stuck consultant whose development has stalled and calibrate the social calendar so togetherness recharges rather than drains. The best minders treat team experience as a deliverable alongside the client work, because alumni describe projects by how the team felt long after they forget what the deck said.

Social Energy Is a Budget

The fifth reality concerns temperament. Consulting teams accomplish a lot in little time, and building rapport with teammates and clients means long hours on site plus shared airports, rental cars, restaurants and hotel lobbies. Extroverts get jazzed by the constant company; people who prefer one-on-one relationships and personal space can find twelve daily hours of social interaction a genuine drain. The advice is unglamorous and important: create boundaries if you need them, because burning out on a team of stereotypical type-A go-getters is a real occupational hazard, and managed energy outlasts performed enthusiasm.

First Seventy-Two Hours With a New Team

Since teams form at kickoff, the opening days deserve deliberate craft. Learn names and one personal fact per teammate before the first client meeting, because rapport compounds from the earliest deposit. Ask each colleague what they are best at and what they want from this project, converting the silent sizing-up into open information. Establish working preferences early, hours, review styles and communication channels, before pressure hardens assumptions into resentments. Volunteer for one visible, unglamorous task in week one, since nothing builds standing faster than covering the work nobody wants. And watch how the senior members treat the hotel staff and the client's assistants, which predicts how they will treat you when deadlines bite. Teams that invest their first seventy-two hours this way perform weeks ahead of those that sprint straight into the workplan.

Anti-Mentors and the Only Test

The sixth reality is that all kinds of people exist, including strange, unprofessional, rude and small-minded ones. Two consolations apply. First, you can learn from everyone, even trolls and goblins, by converting them into anti-mentors who teach what not to do and what not to say. Second, all projects end, no matter how bad they get, and goodbye arrives on schedule. After fifteen-plus years across Fortune 500 and consulting work, one conclusion survives every framework: there are only two types of work colleagues, sorted not by intelligence, manners, communication style, ethics, success or authenticity, but by a single simple test. Do I like working with this person? Ask it honestly about others, and remember that everyone around the table is asking it about you.

- 1Managing Oneself
- 2Groucho Marx
- 3Jason Fried

Summary

Consulting is a team sport with caveats: perpetual new faces, beauty-pageant staffing across availability, level, experience and geography, sticky projects, micro-managers, draining togetherness and the occasional troll turned anti-mentor. All projects end, and one

simple test endures.