Great Consultants Versus Good Ones

Idea In Short

There is no such thing as average in consulting, since average effectively means getting fired. Good performance at every level, grinder, minder or finder, means being a reliable, easy-to-work-with asset. Great performance adds something more: judgment, coaching instinct and the ability to bring in new business.

No Such Thing as Average

A candidate once asked directly what a hiring manager was looking for in a consultant, and the honest answer was simple: it depends. Every consulting project runs on a set of distinct roles, and when those roles are filled well, the whole team performs, people learn, grow and genuinely enjoy the work.1 A lean, well-functioning team converts input into output efficiently, finishes at a reasonable hour, keeps the client happy and creates real opportunity for follow-on work. In consulting, there is effectively no such thing as average, because average performance tends to mean getting cut from the team.

Good Versus Great, Defined Simply

Good means being easy to work with, a reliable asset the team can count on. Great means being a leader, someone worth staying in touch with for decades because that person is going to be genuinely successful in whatever they do next. The gap between the two categories is rarely about raw intelligence; it shows up in specific, observable behaviors layered on top of solid fundamentals.

The Good Grinder

At the analyst and consultant level, good work looks like listening well and requiring limited repeated direction, producing thorough, accurate data cleaning and calculations, organizing research into clear topics rather than a stream of consciousness, writing clean and

understandable emails, staying personally reliable on logistics like meeting minutes and expense reports, and demonstrating the maturity to work comfortably alongside far more experienced colleagues.

The Great Grinder

Everything a good grinder does, plus more: a strong, confident presence in front of the client, the ability to authoritatively answer client questions directly, genuine helpfulness toward other grinders and informal leadership within that group, speed and efficiency in core tools that lets work finish in half the expected time, real diligence that goes the extra mile without becoming a sycophant, and enough coachability that senior people actively want to mentor them rather than simply manage them.

The Good Minder

At the manager and senior manager level, good work looks like keeping a project moving and the team productive, providing clarity on scope that reduces ambiguity for everyone downstream, instilling confidence in both the client and junior team members, producing logical, convincing and genuinely interesting client decks, serving as the informal cultural standard the rest of the team calibrates against, drafting sales proposals to a strong first-draft level and managing staffing and project profitability without financial surprises.

The Great Minder

Everything a good minder does, plus: keeping the client genuinely engaged and even laughing, pushing back appropriately on partners and principals when the situation calls for it, coaching others naturally enough that people actively seek out their opinion, developing real business acumen and a defensible point of view, thinking several steps ahead strategically about the project's risks and next moves, earning a genuine client endorsement usable in future proposals, and actively finding new business and add-on work at the client site.

Finders Are Harder to Generalize

Principals and partners, sometimes called finders, come in enough different shapes and dispositions that a single template does not really apply the way it does for grinders and

minders.2 If reaching partner represents winning the consulting career game, the honest takeaway is that there are many distinct paths to that particular win.

The Same Framework Applies Beyond Consulting

Though the specific titles, grinder, minder, finder, are consulting terminology, the underlying pattern applies broadly to almost any professional services role: an execution layer, a management layer and a business-development layer, each with its own good-versus-great distinction. Anyone outside consulting can substitute their own job titles into this framework and find the same practical gap between reliable and exceptional performance waiting to be closed.

Coaching the Gap Deliberately

Managers who want to move their team from good to great rarely succeed by simply pointing out the gap; specific, observable behaviors have to be named and practiced deliberately. Sitting down with a good grinder to identify exactly which great-grinder behavior to work on next, rather than offering vague encouragement to "step it up," turns an abstract aspiration into something a person can actually practice this week.

A Book Worth the Cent It Costs

Robert Kelley's How to Be a Star at Work remains a frequently recommended read for anyone trying to close the gap between good and great deliberately, a title inexpensive enough that used copies are readily available for pocket change and worth every bit of that modest investment.3

- 1Management Consulting
- 2Partner (Business Rank)
- 3Robert E. Kelley

Summary

Good consultants are reliable assets who require limited direction. Great ones add judgment,

coach others naturally and bring in new business. The gap between good and great is rarely raw talent; it's the specific extra behaviors layered on top of solid fundamentals.