What Consultants Learn From Mechanics

Idea In Short

A car mechanic's shop wall listed seven values in ten-foot letters: integrity, friendliness, pride of workmanship, trust, teamwork, quality and continuous improvement. Every one applies directly to consultants billing hundreds of dollars an hour, and few consulting firms would have the nerve to post the same list this publicly.

A Wall Worth Reading

A sign covering an entire wall of a car mechanic's shop, roughly ten feet tall, listed out the values the shop held itself to.1 If that is the standard a mechanic sets for an oil change, it is worth asking whether it should be the bare minimum for consultants billing hundreds of dollars an hour for far more consequential advice.

Integrity Comes First

Billing extra hours, quietly dropping inconvenient data points or otherwise cutting corners cheats the client directly, and it poisons the exact well the consultant is drinking from. Clients cannot forensically review every formula in a spreadsheet; they are trusting the consultant to do right by them without that verification. Even when nobody else would ever know, the consultant knows, which is the entire point of professional integrity.

Friendliness Is Not Fluff

Most consulting projects require genuine change management, meaning getting people to do something new or uncomfortable, and that work is fundamentally persuasive. People give a consultant the benefit of the doubt, and the chance to actually build a case and lead, only when they like, trust and believe in that person first. Likability is not a soft skill layered on top of the real work; it is a prerequisite for the real work happening at all.

Pride of Workmanship

The work itself functions as a calling card, and the best future client is almost always the current one. One partner put it memorably to a client: the firm was not the cheapest option, but the client was buying consultants who think about the problem on weekends. That kind of ownership, worrying about the client's problem more than the client does, is what separates billable hours from genuine value.

Trust, Honesty and the Long Game

Consulting is fundamentally a relationship business, and some of the most successful careers are built on one or two deep client relationships sustained over many years rather than a wide, shallow client list. Trust compounds slowly, honesty has to be proven repeatedly rather than claimed once, and respect is very much a long game, closer to the observation that overnight success usually takes about a decade to actually happen.

Teamwork on the Hard Problems

Clients solve their easy problems internally; nobody pays premium consulting rates for simple fixes. What gets escalated to outside consultants is the messy, cross-functional, genuinely hairy work, which by definition requires real teaming, both among consultants and with the client's own people, to solve well.

Quality Is Defined by the Client, Not the Consultant

Quality is one of the most overused words in professional services, and the practical definition is simple: the client decides. Doing genuinely excellent work matters, and the client has to perceive it as excellent too, since satisfaction functions as perception minus expectations rather than as an objective internal scorecard.

Continuous Improvement, Applied to the Work Itself

No process is ever perfect, and the ongoing hunt for improvement is useful, dynamic and often genuinely enjoyable, the same lean and Six Sigma instincts that show up in classic process-improvement methodology.2 Consultants who apply that same rigor to their own work habits, not just the client's processes, tend to compound their skill faster than peers

who treat the craft as already finished.

We Are All Some Kind of Consultant

The exercise applies more broadly than the consulting industry alone. Nearly every professional service, medical, legal, financial, mechanical, involves a client who does not fully understand what is wrong and is trusting an expert to look underneath the surface and explain it honestly rather than exploit the information gap. That client is naturally a little wary, worried about being talked down to or quietly upsold, which makes every one of the seven values above a direct answer to a legitimate, universal fear rather than an abstract corporate slogan.

The Uncomfortable Closing Question

Reading through this list naturally raises an uncomfortable question: would any given consultant, or firm, be genuinely willing to post these same seven values publicly, without hedging language or a qualifying asterisk about scope of work? Most professionals would hesitate, worried about being called hypocritical the first time reality falls short. That hesitation is itself worth sitting with, since a mechanic charging far less per hour apparently found the courage to put it in writing on a very large wall.3

- 1Automobile Repair Shop
- 2Continuous Improvement
- 3Professional Ethics

Summary

Integrity, friendliness, pride of workmanship, trust, teamwork, quality and continuous improvement: a mechanic's shop wall doubles as a consulting code of conduct. The harder question is whether any of us would be brave enough to post it, unqualified, on our own wall.