Consulting Runs on Tribes

Idea In Short

Consulting firms function less like a single unified organization and more like a collection of tribes, each built around a partner and the loyal group of principals, senior managers and consultants who consistently staff that partner's engagements. Understanding this structure early, and deliberately choosing which tribe to join as a career progresses, matters as much as the specific work itself.

Firms Function as Collections of Tribes

Consulting firms operate less like one unified organization and more like a collection of tribes, each built around an individual partner and the loyal group of principals, senior managers and consultants who consistently staff that partner's engagements.1 Even a casual observer notices the pattern quickly: certain consultants become known as belonging to a specific partner's group, staffed reliably on that partner's projects year after year.

Why Partners Cultivate Loyal Teams

From a partner's perspective, the logic is straightforward. Training an entirely new set of team leaders from scratch on every engagement wastes enormous time and energy, so partners naturally gravitate toward a small, proven group of people they can rely on repeatedly, working them hard and rewarding them in return. That instinct mirrors the singular focus of a small business owner who depends on a trusted core team rather than constantly onboarding strangers.

Generalist Early, Specialist Later

New consultants typically enter as generalists, rotating across a genuine diversity of industries, functions and project types. Rising through the ranks changes that calculus considerably, since senior consultants typically specialize in a specific industry or function,

building a recognizable reputation over decades of similar engagements, developing genuine mastery through the kind of accumulated deliberate practice serious expertise requires, and building a professional network concentrated within that same specialty.2

Some Partners Just Want Reliable Delivery

Not every partner focuses heavily on practice-building activities like recruiting or committee work. Some are almost entirely client-facing, focused on selling engagements, staffing projects and delivering results without much appetite for internal politics. These partners specifically want a dependable tribe of consultants who can be deployed consistently and get the work done without excessive complaint or friction.

Enjoy the Breadth While It Lasts

Anyone new to consulting should genuinely enjoy the early rotational period, since it offers real variety across industries, project types and managers, along with broad exposure to foundational skills: spreadsheet modeling, presentation building, client interaction, proposal writing, interviewing and industry research. That breadth rarely persists once a career moves toward more senior levels.

Staying a Generalist Too Long Becomes a Liability

As a consultant advances into manager, senior manager and eventually principal roles, specialization becomes increasingly important, along with aligning more deliberately under one or two key partners. Staying deliberately noncommittal about industry, function or partner loyalty at that stage becomes a genuine liability rather than a sign of flexibility; having a clear point of view about a career direction matters more the further someone advances.

Choosing the Right Tribe Matters as Much as the Work

Ultimately, finding genuinely enjoyable work matters, but finding people worth trusting and learning from matters just as much, if not more, as a career progresses. A well-known management thinker's framing applies directly here: focus on who before focusing on what, since the people surrounding a consultant shape staffing, mentorship and promotion odds more directly than any individual project ever could.3

The Odds Get Steeper Every Year

Promotion at senior levels follows an unforgiving pyramid shape, with meaningfully fewer available seats at every rung above the last. Some estimates suggest roughly one in ten entering consultants ultimately reaches partner, comparable to admission rates at the most selective universities, a genuinely humbling statistic given that this specific talent pool already cleared a similarly demanding bar just to enter the firm in the first place.

Watch for Feedback Before the Formal Review

Waiting until a formal year-end review to learn whether real contribution is happening, recruiting, tool development, proposal writing, coaching, project delivery, wastes valuable time that could have been spent adjusting course sooner. Staying genuinely aware, in real time, of how effectively a person is leading peers and driving change matters far more than any single annual conversation, and asking honestly whether a person functions as a genuinely indispensable contributor is a much better ongoing gut check than simply waiting patiently for a scheduled review to eventually deliver the verdict.

- 1Organizational Culture
- 2Career Specialization
- 3Jim Collins [Author]

Summary

Consulting firms function as a collection of tribes built around individual partners, and understanding that structure early changes how a career should be navigated. Enjoy the generalist variety of early years, then deliberately specialize and choose a tribe, since who a person works for ultimately matters as much as what they work on.