Hired to Deliver Hard News

Idea In Short

Organizations sometimes hire outside advisers for a purpose they rarely state directly:

> to be the visible face of an unpopular decision

Cost reduction, restructuring and job elimination projects often require someone outside the internal chain of command to present the plan publicly, absorb the criticism and let permanent staff keep their standing with colleagues. Recognizing this role clearly, and handling it with discipline, protects both the adviser's reputation and the client relationship.

A role rarely stated out loud

People hire outside advisers for many reasons, and one of the least discussed is simply this:

> to be the bad guy

Restructuring plans, cost reduction programs and staffing cuts at public institutions and private companies alike sometimes require an outside party to present the analysis publicly, absorb the resulting criticism and let permanent leadership preserve their standing with the people who remain.

Consultants usually prefer the background

This role runs against the industry's usual instinct. Advisory firms generally prefer staying behind the scenes, letting the client present findings internally and externally, for good reasons and bad. When an adviser instead stands in front of an affected audience to walk through a restructuring plan, including which roles and functions face elimination, that adviser has stepped well outside the typical low-visibility posture the profession prefers.

Earning the fee the hard way

Presenting difficult recommendations directly to an audience that will be affected by them is genuinely demanding work. Holding public sessions to explain cost reductions, staffing changes or organizational restructuring puts a specific face and name on decisions that leadership would rather not attach to themselves personally. That visibility is precisely why clients pay for this kind of engagement, and precisely why it deserves careful handling.

Scrutiny follows the visible adviser

Once an adviser becomes the public face of a difficult decision, scrutiny tends to follow closely behind, including questions about the adviser's own fees, expenses and travel costs. That scrutiny is a predictable, almost inevitable consequence of taking on visible, unpopular work, and advisers who accept this kind of assignment should expect their own conduct to be examined as closely as the recommendation itself.1

A short discipline for handling it well

A handful of practical habits reduce both reputational and legal exposure on this kind of assignment.

- Follow an established process, since restructuring and cost reduction work has existed for decades and will continue to exist
- Document everything, since client sponsors, executives and project leads can change mid-engagement
- Use external benchmarks rather than personal opinion to create genuine, defensible objectivity
- Work in teams, conducting interviews and presenting findings together rather than alone
- Stay visibly professional and avoid giving critics any personal material to seize on

- Complete the work and move forward, trusting that necessary organizational change justified the difficulty involved

Why this work still matters

None of this makes the assignment comfortable, and it should not. Genuine organizational change, the kind that keeps an institution solvent or competitive, sometimes requires exactly this uncomfortable, visible role.2 An adviser who accepts that role with discipline, rather than resentment or carelessness, protects the client relationship and their own professional reputation at the same time.

The line between courage and recklessness

Being willing to deliver hard news is not the same as being careless about how it gets delivered. The advisers who handle this work best treat the discomfort as part of the job description rather than a reason to cut corners on rigor, and they recognize that the same visibility that invites criticism is also what makes their fee, and their value, genuinely earned.3

- 1Change Management
- 2Organizational Restructuring
- 3Professional Ethics

Summary

Consulting engagements sometimes exist specifically to give a client a visible, external face for an unpopular decision, and doing that work well requires real discipline:

> documenting everything, using benchmarks instead of opinion, working in teams and staying out of the limelight otherwise

Being willing to be the bad guy, without becoming careless about how the news gets delivered, is a genuine professional skill.