



## The Politics of Consultants

by Grace L. Judson

The political implications of bringing in outside consultants are complex and often overlooked.

Whether deliberately or simply obliviously, most decisions to hire consultants are made by senior management without addressing the questions, concerns, and fears of the people assigned to the project. Consultants often arrive in front of the employees they'll be working closely with only to discover that those employees have only the foggiest, often inaccurate, idea of what's happening.

If the consultant is politically sensitive, he'll understand that what he was hired to accomplish is only part of his work. He'll know that his first task is to understand *and* help set the tone of the political landscape he'll inhabit throughout the life of the project. Who are the people involved, what's their understanding of the project, how will the project affect their jobs, and — most importantly — how do they *think* it will affect their jobs?

Unfortunately, it's the rare consultant who pauses to address these questions before diving into the work. Realistically enough, consultants have strict time constraints and specific deliverables to complete. Just like anyone else, they're prone to tunnel vision on what they consider to be their primary objective. They may not realize that being responsive to the politics is in their best interest. Some may even have chosen consulting as a career in an effort to *avoid* workplace politics.

As an employee assigned to a consultant-run project, you have the opportunity to affect how the project unfolds. Whether you're a manager, team leader, or team member, take a moment to understand what you think and believe about the project. Then follow these suggestions (and forward this article to the rest of the team and to your manager) to help create a positive political environment, assist in ensuring the success of the project, and demonstrate your own leadership abilities.

### Address concerns

Rationally or not, the first thing crossing the mind of most team members when they hear about a consulting project is, "Am I going to be laid off?! What's going to happen to my job? Will I have to learn something new?"

People fear change, and a consulting project *always* heralds change. You may not agree with their fears, you may not share them (though I'd suggest that somewhere down deep, you probably do), and you may think it's a waste of time trying to address their concerns. But if you *don't* address them, you run serious risks of having the project delayed, undermined, and potentially fail.

Don't assume everyone knows what's going on. Meet with the team before the consultants arrive. Bring the fears out into the open, address them with understanding and compassion *and* concrete action, and you'll establish a positive team culture that will help the work go much more smoothly.

### Validate and Clarify

Does everyone understand what the project is?

After my first experience of starting a project kick-off meeting only to learn that the team had little understanding of my role as the consultant, their role as the project team, and what the project was intended to accomplish, I learned not to be surprised by anything. Now I start out with an in-depth discussion that brings everyone's understanding into alignment.

Ask the consultant to spend at least half an hour, longer if the project is at all complex, creating this alignment. Explain to her that although you and your team believe you understand the project, it would be helpful to ensure everyone is speaking and acting from the same starting point. Help facilitate the meeting so that it's a discussion, not a presentation.

If she'd already planned to do this, make a note: you've been fortunate in your selection of consultants.

## Be a Political Assistant

The consultant is there because he has expertise that your management chose to buy rather than developing internally.

Whether you agree with that decision or not, it's to your benefit to assist the consultant in navigating the political landscape. It will help the project move more smoothly and quickly. It will position you as an internal expert and leader. And it will speed his departure, since the project will progress faster if he's not continually tripping over political land-mines.

Being a political assistant does *not* mean gossiping, telling anyone's private stories, or revealing the company's internal secrets.

It *does* mean letting the consultant know what she needs to know in order to be successful. This can range from "Joe's schedule doesn't allow him to spend a lot of time answering email — you'll get better answers faster if you schedule a meeting with him," to "Did you know we've got two IT managers? They'll both want to be included in the planning sessions."

Be sure that your suggestions are clean of any judgment that reflects negatively on you or your organization. It may be true that Joe's manager has written him up for never answering email, or that everyone jokes about the Two-Headed Hydra in the IT department, but the consultant doesn't need to know that.

Be sensitive about making these suggestions as *suggestions*, not as patronizing or bossy instructions. Consultants are hired for their expertise; rightly or wrongly, some can be touchy about showing uncertainty or taking advice except from senior management. Don't jeopardize your standing with your team or the organization by offering assistance if it's not accepted. A good consultant will recognize the value of your support.

## Finally...

Consultants bring valuable expertise to bear on projects that are important to your organization's success. Wise use of consultants provides value to an organization well beyond completion of the project they were hired to do. Teams working with effective consultants learn as they work, and bring that knowledge to their future projects. Helping the consultants your company hires to be successful is in everyone's best interest.

*"My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions."*

*Peter Drucker, 1909-2005, naturalized American citizen of Austrian birth, noted management consultant, writer, and university professor.*

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Article Date: March 18, 2008