

Consulting skills and characteristics

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There is no perfect or ideal consultant model but there are some common characteristics in consultancy which differentiate it from other professions requiring a high level of technical knowledge but which have other objectives and methods of intervention (for example, research, teaching).

In consulting, great importance is attached to problem solving and analytical ability as well as to competence in behavioural science, in communication skills, and in helping people understand and manage change.

Professional speciality

First and foremost, a consultant must have a professional speciality that provides the basis for sharing expertise. In consulting, this speciality must be complemented by the knowledge and the competence relevant to adapting and transferring that expertise.

Many useful lists of the 'characteristics of an ideal consultant' can be found; an example of such a list is given in Figure 14. The first significant attempt at a definition of these characteristics was made by ACME in the United States (Shay, 1974, pp. 41–42; see also Lippitt and Lippitt, 1978, chap. 7; Johnson, 1982, chap. 1)

In summary, the qualities and attributes required in successful consultancy fall within two broad categories:

- intellectual ability
- personal attributes.

A comprehensive list of these qualities is presented in Figure 15.

Analytical and problem-solving skills

A consultant should demonstrate a systematic approach to problem solving and have knowledge of the following skills and techniques:

- diagnostic skills
- data collection and recording techniques
- techniques for data and problem analysis

Figure 14 Characteristics of the ideal consultant

- 1 A respect for the goals and cultures of host clients
- 2 The capacity to apply his/her analysis to the realities of the client's needs
- 3 A willingness to do a lot of hard and concentrated work
- 4 An understanding of the economic situation of the host country and its implications
- 5 An appreciation of likely implementation difficulties: need for phasing
- 6 The ability to involve clients especially those with a natural tendency to regard consultants as experts
- 7 The ability to write reports in simple, straightforward language comprehensible to the client
- 8 An understanding/appreciation that his/her role is to represent the consultancy organisation and not simply him/herself
- 9 An ability to match the client's needs to an aid donor's specific funding requirements/conditions

Source: Commonwealth workshop on educational consultancy skills; Vanuatu 1992

- techniques for developing action proposals
- techniques for creative thinking
- techniques for evaluating and selecting alternatives
- techniques for measuring and assessing results.

More details on these and the whole range of diagnostic/analytical skills can be found in the literature. A particularly useful text is: M. Kubr *Management Consulting: A guide to the profession*, 2nd edn., International Labour Office, 1986.

Behavioural and communication competency

Consulting involves people dealing with people. As a consultant, you must therefore have a good grounding in behavioural sciences and an understanding of such topics as:

- the behaviour roles of you and your client
- your client's psychology
- the techniques for diagnosing attitudes, human relations, behaviour and management styles in organisations.

Communication skills

Communication is the vehicle for transmitting knowledge and introducing change. Throughout the whole consulting process you will be involved in *receiving* and *presenting* information. Both processes require specific skills and it is considered that mastery of these skills is a necessity for successful consulting. Communication can be oral or written.

Figure 15 Qualities of a consultant

1	Intellectual ability <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ability to learn quickly and easily• ability to observe, gather, select and evaluate facts• good judgement• inductive and deductive reasoning• ability to synthesise and generalise• creative imagination and original thinking
2	Ability to understand people and work with them <ul style="list-style-type: none">• respect and tolerance for other people• ability to anticipate and evaluate human reactions• easy human contacts• ability to gain trust and respect• courtesy and good manners
3	Ability to communicate, persuade and motivate <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ability to listen• facility in oral and written communication• ability to teach and train people• ability to persuade and motivate
4	Intellectual and emotional maturity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• stability of behaviour and action• independence in drawing unbiased conclusions• ability to withstand pressures and live with frustrations and uncertainties• ability to act with poise and in a calm and objective manner• self-control in all situations• flexibility and adaptability to changed conditions
5	Personal drive and initiative <ul style="list-style-type: none">• right degree of self-confidence• healthy ambition• entrepreneurial spirit• courage, initiative and perseverance in action
6	Ethics and integrity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• genuine desire to help others• extreme honesty• ability to recognise the limitation of one's competence• ability to admit mistakes and learn from failure
7	Physical and mental health <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ability to sustain the specific working and living conditions of management consultants

Source: M. Kubr *Management Consulting: A guide to the profession*, 2nd revised edn., International Labour Office, 1986

Interpersonal skills

Successful consulting requires very good interpersonal skills. Consultants must be able to communicate and deal with people in an atmosphere of tact, trust, politeness, and friendliness.

Some of the necessary skills, knowledge and attributes can be learned, some you may have already experienced or know, but it is also the case that experienced consultants have a special quality that makes them credible to their clients. This quality may be charismatic, professional, a warm personality, or a combination of all three.

A consultant who is entering a client system also needs a strong tolerance of ambiguity. First acquaintance with a client can be marked by a certain amount of bewilderment. It takes time to figure out the situation, and during this time you are going to experience a certain amount of confusion. You must expect this to occur and not be worried by it. On the other hand, in many small states, the ministry clients and consultants working in tertiary institutions will know one another well. Social, professional and political relationships interact. You must endeavour to understand the mix of factors which impact on the resolution of a technical problem. To be objective, yet sensitive, in this context requires an ability to investigate context; to move beyond the purely technical.

Coupled with your tolerance for ambiguity must be patience and a highly-developed ability to tolerate frustration. Helping a client to find goals and solve problems is likely to be a long and confrontational experience. Quick results, full co-operation, and complete success are unlikely.

If people think they may be adversely affected, they will usually respond to attempts to change their relationships and behaviour patterns with resistance or dependency, resentment or over-enthusiasm, and obstructionism or rationalisation. It is important for you as a consultant to be mature and realistic enough to recognise that many of your actions and hopes for change are going to be frustrated.

If you objectively conclude that you cannot help your client, you should, of course, withdraw. If possible, you should also refer your client to some other source of professional help. This also requires maturity.

A good sense of timing is important; timing can be crucial. The best-conceived and articulated plans for change can be destroyed if introduced at the wrong time. Timing is linked to a knowledge of your client, to the realities of the consulting situation, and to the kind of patience that overrides enthusiasm for trying out a newly-conceived alternative.

Professional attitude

Above all, consultants must be professional in attitude and behaviour. To be successful, you must be sincerely interested in helping your client. If your primary concern is making a large fee rather than helping your client, then he/she will soon recognise and deal with you accordingly. People in trouble are not fools. They can sense objectivity, honesty and, above all, integrity.

Such an array of skills and competencies is not easily achieved and you should continue to evaluate your own skill and style. Any training programme should aim to provide opportunities and time for improving such characteristics as good judgement, analytical and problem-solving ability, skill in

interpersonal relations, and the ability to communicate and persuade. Training programmes should also aim at improving other qualities such as self-confidence, integrity and independence.