

What's A Consultant?

My dictionary provides two definitions of "consultant."

1. "A person who consults with another or others."
2. "An expert who is called on for professional or technical advice or opinions."

These definitions prompt two more questions:

1. What is meant by "consult"?
2. What is meant by "an expert"?

To consult means to "seek advice from," as in seek advice from an accountant or an attorney. Thus, it would seem that clients are also consultants in that they are the ones who are usually seen as seeking advice. That does not help us much with our search for the identity of a consultant, so let us move on to "expert."

An expert, or so my Websters informs me, is someone who is "very skillful; having much training and knowledge in a special field." We all know that there might or might not be a connection between our training and our knowledge and skills. From this, it follows that a consultant, if he or she is indeed an expert, must be an effective learner, that is, capable of acquiring knowledge and skill from experience, whether or not that experience involves training.

Expert, experience, experiential, and experiment -- these words all have a common Latin root -- *experiri*, meaning to try, to test, to prove. A consultant, then, is above all else empirical, that is, willing to try things to see what happens.

If you listen closely, sooner or later you will hear this definition of a consultant:

"A consultant is someone who comes in, borrows your watch, tells you what time it is, keeps the watch, and charges you an exorbitant fee."

Many view that definition as a put-down of consultants. I do not. Here's why.

A consultant is usually from outside the client organization, hence the "someone who comes in" portion of the preceding definition. Consultants learn about their clients from observing, studying and interviewing them and it is what they learn about their clients that they eventually share with their clients. This accounts for the portions of the definition "borrows your watch" and "tells you what time it is." Consultants also retain what they learn, thus "keeps the watch."

And what about "charges you an exorbitant fee"? Well, for me, that portion of the definition refers to the fact that people who can't see what's right in front of them typically downplay the value of those who succeed in getting them to see those matters. It is as though they are saying, "I should have seen that all along, so I resent having to pay your fee for pointing it out to me."

A consultant, then, is someone who helps others profit and learn from their own experience. A really good consultant also helps clients see the value of their experience and so the fees are rarely seen as "exorbitant."