

Knowledge Worker

The Consultant's Competency Circle: A Postscript for Internal Consultants

(March 2014)

There is no better example of a knowledge worker than the consultant. They can be found outside and inside most organizations, in large firms and small and as members of consulting firms and working as independents. In the February 2013 issue of *Performance Improvement*, we examined the skills and knowledge needed to succeed as an independent consultant (Nickols & Bergholz, 2013). We were recently urged to speak to the different challenges faced by internal consultants. This column is our response.

We are confident 90%+ of the 2013 article is fully applicable for internal consultants, especially “The Success Triangle” (see Figure 1 below). However, the few differences described below are certainly substantive, and the successful internal consultant would do well to master them. The balance of this column examines the most important differences.

Consulting Success Triangle



- *Diplomacy and Politics.* Internal consultants are especially susceptible to getting caught up in the vested interests of those to whom they are beholden for plum assignments, career advancement, or compensation decisions. Although external consultants need to be politically savvy and attuned to the politics of their clients and client organizations, they don't continue to live within those interdependent relationships when the assignment finishes.
- *Long-Term Relationships.* Because internal consultants usually need to maintain healthy organization relationships, they must navigate their consulting engagements with a very delicate touch. This often calls for different project management leadership from the external consultants; namely, gathering more and deeper inputs and concurrence, often with more rounds having to be accomplished before decisions can be taken. Though external consultants prefer to build long-term relationships, most often those are short-term. Also, most external consultants are either juggling multiple engagements, or are eager to complete one and move on to the next, and so tend to manage projects with – might we say – sharper elbows than the internal consultant can afford to use.

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- *Living with Consequences.* Truly successful external consultants try to stay engaged post-engagement to help “live the consequences” of their work and help make needed tweaks. In reality, that is rare, as most simply disappear at engagement’s end. Internal consultants cannot do that. They have to live with the long-term consequences of their actions. This can be a dangerous double-edged sword: because they continue to live there, the risk exists to avoid the truly tough decisions and actions that may be needed, yet could permanently tear up their relationships or make them a pariah; on the other hand, internal consultants are likely to be more sensitive, thoughtful, and careful as they manage their way through the thorniest thicket of organization issues.
- *Subject to Authority.* Internal consultants perform under typically more stringent and multi-sourced authority. External consultants most often have a singular accountability point, be it a group, such as a board of directors, or the CEO. Internals are more likely to suffer the many small cuts that come with trying to keep their own managers satisfied, along with the project sponsors, as well as other executives who have vested interests in the outcomes.
- *Assigned Projects.* Internal consultants may try to do some “marketing” to snare a good assignment, but most often these are simply assigned. External consultants typically market their services to acquire clients, and thus must develop this as a proficiency.
- *In-Depth Knowledge of Organization & Players.* Internal consultants benefit from the greater depth and breadth of organization knowledge they bring to an engagement; the risk is getting tangled in the weeds as a result and dragging down the project and their client in the process. The external consultant brings some added value precisely because of his/her objectivity. Of course, they must regularly borrow the client’s watch to tell them what time it is.

The differences, then, are not many, but they are substantial in their potential impact on engagement management and outcomes. It is a wise client who recognizes the risks and the benefits of deploying an internal consultant and makes the appropriate choice at the right time.

Reference

Nickols, F. and H. Bergholz (2013). The Consultant’s Competency Circle. *Performance Improvement*, Vol 52, No 2, (February). Available at http://www.nickols.us/The_Consulting_Competency_Circle.pdf

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