



How to be your own management consultant

con·sult·ant [kuhn-suhltnt] *n*

a person who gives professional or expert advice

The widespread and increasing role of consultants in contemporary organisational life provokes irritation and mirth, even from their sponsors and supporters. We all know the quip about consultants borrowing your watch so they can tell you the time. A search on Google reveals links to millions and millions of pages of jokes about consultants and consulting. Two examples of this shadow humour are in boxes 1 and 2.

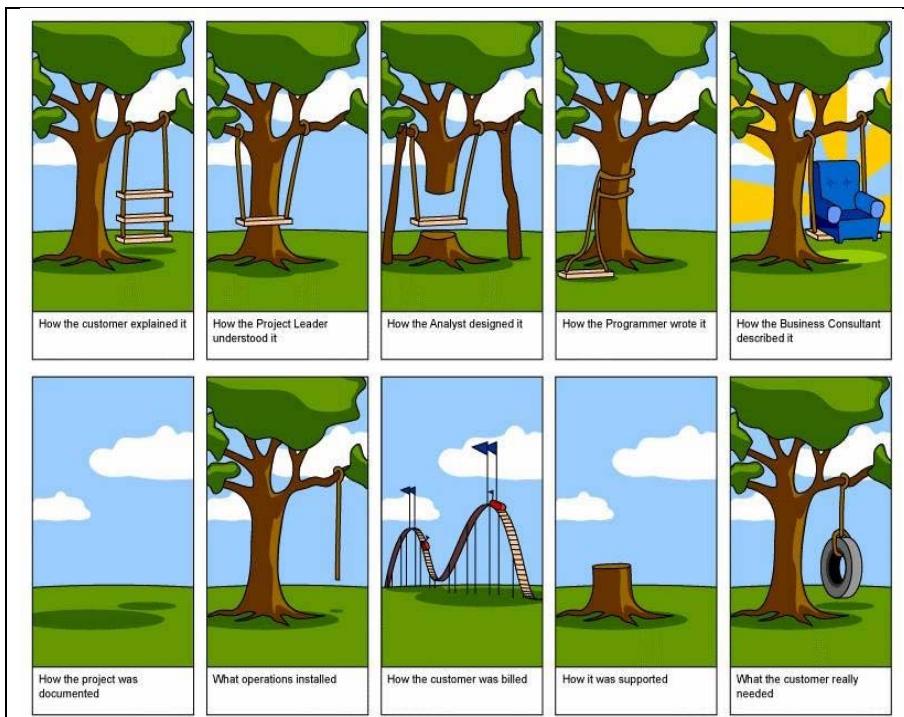
Box 1

Top Ten Things You'll Never Hear from your Consultant

1. You're right; we're billing way too much for this.
2. Bet you I can go a week without saying "synergy" or "value-added".
3. How about paying us based on the success of the project?
4. This whole strategy is based on a Harvard business case I read.
5. Actually, the only difference is that we charge more than they do.
6. I don't know enough to speak intelligently about that.
7. Implementation? I only care about writing long reports.
8. I can't take the credit. It was Ed in your marketing department.
9. The problem is, you have too much work for too few people.
10. Everything looks okay to me. You really don't need me.

<http://www.workjoke.com/projoke55.htm>

Box 2



Block, in his book *Flawless Consulting*, offers consultants as *the* earliest profession: after all it was the serpent who advised Eve to eat the apple. And this metaphor of consultant as snake from the consultant's consultant - the guru for rookies to the trade!

While hiring consultants can be a dysfunctional defence against the anxiety of leadership or a way of delaying action or passing the buck, their growing use bears testimony to the value of bringing a detached and thoughtful perspective into the hurly burly of day-to-day business life. In this way, the growth of the consultancy sector clearly offers something to the perplexed executive in their right-sized, outsourced company operating in an ever more complex and confusing world. Management consultants help by offering answers for the strategic view and project detail. Organisational consultants advise on the design and dynamics of organisations. Process consultants work to improve systems and to help people to relate together better.

But while traditional consulting projects can meet the immediate need to "come up with an answer", it tends to do little to build clients' own capabilities in tackling the challenging questions that face them. Is there another way? How do you get the benefit of companionable insight into complex situations - something that is clearly worth a lot - while not relying on consultants to tell you the answer?

At iDENK, we are dedicated to helping people get great results from their own brilliant thinking. Thinking as individuals and thinking together. In this way, our approach, to some extent, helps individuals, teams and organisations become their own consultants. You can see the parallel with the techniques used in one high profile branch of consulting - that of sports coaching - and from this it is possible to model those things that determine why the best consultants really do excel in helping their clients work it out for themselves.

The iDENK method demonstrates the three C's to high impact consultancy and ensures that those we work with learn these skills to apply on other issues when our input is finished. The three C's of consultancy are: clarifying the question, cognition (holistic thinking) and communicating the insight clearly.

Clarifying the question

Focusing the mind on a clear statement of a problem, critical question or 'wicked issue' is helpful. The way that both the human and corporate mind works means we make most progress with what we pay attention to.

The skills needed to clarify the question can seem deceptively easy, but involve:

- listening intently: what is the situation, what is the complication or issue faced, where is the attention?

- seeing deeply: what is not being said or allowed?
- asking great questions: to clarify and test
- summarising, framing and reframing: is a choice, trade-off, dilemma, paradox or polarity implied?

These skills are at the heart of the first phase of the consulting cycle: contracting. Being clear to your self what you are interested in and how much resource you would put into it is really helpful. What is your question? What is your team concerned about? How much staff time will you spend on addressing this? How can you approach this in ways that are of use to your organisation?

Cognition: capacity for holistic thinking

Knowing the question is in itself insufficient. The issue may be overwhelming and so freezes action. The problem may be pretty tricky and so gets left in the ‘too difficult’ box. Or the concern might be important, but not urgent, and so gets put on the ‘back burner’. What is needed, and what the best consultants offer, is a way of thinking about a topic that makes it manageable. The iDENK thinking system brings together the best bits of the different genres of traditional consultancy and also includes insights from psychology, therapy and coaching (see figure). The good news is these skills can be learnt. The ‘black box’ can be opened, understood, practiced and perfected.

Integrated Thinking System: for holistic insight and thorough action

A unique blend:

- Logical and emotional; left and right brain
- Step by step and intuitive leaps
- Imagination, inspiration, and implementation
- Types of logic: What is, what should be and what could be
- Working visually, with lots of talking listening and doing: engaging head heart and hands
- Dealing with the straightforward and exploring what lies beneath
- Harnessing individual difference and team action
- Working with the past, in the present and for the future
- Focusing on potential whilst acknowledging pathology and problems
- What can be controlled or influenced; what sure of and what uncertain about

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The mix of thinking approaches from the technically clever to the emotionally skilled can be acquired. Intellect and rapport, wisdom and warmth - the full range of thinking can be developed.

Buying in thinking capacity is the main driver when hiring consultants. However, individuals and groups can learn to think through the most complex issues together in time efficient ways. Moreover, doing your own

thinking speeds action - it addresses the root cause of the much maligned implementation gap, that is ownership.

Communicating the insight clearly

How to share the insights from the clear thinking of top consultants is about more than reports and PowerPoint slide-decks. Clarifying the message and medium is the heart of the challenge. Who else might be interested in your thinking - recognising that a 'stakeholder' is someone with an interest in your success *or* failure. What are the best ways to share the new insights, innovations and ideas for action - one to one, face to face, stories, posters, video, cascade, logic and emotion...the options are endless. The Institute for Healthcare Improvement based in Boston, MA - a not for profit organisation at the heart of improving health care systems around the world - suggests an important insight needs to be shared 8x8. That is Eight Times in Eight Ways. This latest ideas in Change Management and Leadership - about tipping points, fashions, campaign, social movement, emergence, responsible autonomy - are critical for communication and action. These ideas can be explored, rehearsed and acted on. Knowing how to use these insights is critical to line and executive leaders, and not just consultants.

In summary

The consultant mindset is helpful and when used to its best can be hugely productive - the growth of the consultancy sector to its current place at the heart of the global knowledge economy demonstrates its utility. The downsides of approach can be minimised by learning the thinking skills that underpin best consulting practice. Leading-edge consulting is about helping individuals and teams to think brilliantly more of the time and to consistently turn that thinking into successful action. iDENK's range of group coaching-based solutions help clients practice and perfect these skills so they themselves can use them again and again. Perfecting the 3 Cs can help you become your own management consultant.

iDENK brings together a diverse community of highly talented professionals to help people do their own thinking on their own issues to get action that they own.

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Refs

Block, Peter. *Flawless Consulting: A guide to getting your expertise used*, Pfeiffer 1999