

Keys to Effective Consulting

You have two ears and one mouth for a reason

"The best advice I was given 15 years ago when I struck out on my own as a consultant: 'Don't give the client what they want. Do give them what they need.' You must tailor-make your decisions based on the client's needs, so your best tool is listening," says Tim Robinson, a partner at Accenture.

What consultancies look for, says Robinson, is a fairly broad set of abilities: "The skills include having personal credibility with clients and being able to build ownership with clients. Individuals need to have stature and gravitas; have good communication skills." Moreover, he adds, empathy is important too: they need to be sensitive to the environment the client is in, whether that is a particular corporate culture or national culture: "Ultimately it's about having good antennae."

Tim Robinson says that there is also a strong organizational element: "They need to have good management skills – to be able to organize and direct work, and to analyze and define problems." Consultants, he explains, "will often find themselves in a situation where they have to filter lots of information and a myriad of issues and find out what the real issues are and how to address these."

Alison Wilcox, director of development at the Hay Group takes a more personal approach: "I suppose the thing that strikes me more and more is that a lot of it is just about building relationships – building and managing relationships so you get to the point where you're trusted. It sounds very simplistic, but it's not – you often have to say no to things people really want to do. It's a long game – building up a trusted advisor role and all sorts of emotional intelligence comes into play. Basically it's all about trying to get into the rhythm of the culture of the client."

Many of the skills that would make a good consultant would actually make for a good person in most situations. Rebecca Fawcett at Towers Perrin says that

for this reason potential recruits are to be found all over the place: "A lot of what makes a good consultant are relatively soft skills. If you're looking at people to build networks and relationships, you could source them from any sector."

Tips for Successful Consulting:

- Get past the symptoms to the problems
- Build personal relationships
- Never criticize, condemn or complain
- Become genuinely interested in your client
- Talk in terms of the other person's interests
- Ask intelligent questions
- Be a good listener
- Give your exclusive attention
- They should do most of the talking
- Praise strengths
- Use names whenever possible
- Smile
- Greet with enthusiasm
- Avoid arguments; you can only lose
- Welcome disagreement and be thankful for a differing opinion
- Stay calm
- Identify areas of agreement
- Admitting errors and saying "I don't know" builds confidence
- Open the conversation with praise
- Use a friendly tone
- Be empathetic
- Be self-effacing
- Ask yourself "Why would someone be interesting in what I am saying or proposing?"
- Try honestly and continuously to see things from the others perspective
- Let everyone "save face"
- Be proactive
- Begin with the end in mind
- Put first priorities first
- Seek to first understand, then be understood

Listening to a Client

A consultant's primary responsibility is to help clients find the best solutions to their needs. This means asking questions and then listening — *really* listening — to the answers. The simple fact is that you can't possibly understand what your potential clients need unless you give them the opportunity to *tell* you. And you can't possibly *hear* what your client is telling you unless you take the time to listen!

To make sure that you ask clients the right questions *and* listen to the answers, follow these four steps to effective asking and listening:

1. **Ask open-ended questions that define the boundaries of the opportunity.**

When you first meet potential clients, you really have no idea what their needs are, how extensive those needs are, and what addressing them will require. Therefore, your first task is to ask the kinds of open-

ended questions that help you define the big picture, the rough boundaries of the opportunities it presents, and, thereby, the rough boundaries of your solutions. Avoid asking questions that may introduce an element of trepidation into your relationship.

2. Use active silence.

When it comes to listening, silence is golden — not the disinterested silence that comes from having more pressing matters on your mind, but the active silence that tells your clients that you're involved in what they have to say and are interested, thinking, and putting your all into understanding their issues and perspectives.

3. Ask clarifying questions.

Clarifying questions take you from the big picture to the little picture and help you to refine your understanding of your clients' opportunities.

4. Confirm your understandings.

An important part of the process of asking questions and listening to their answers is periodically confirming your understandings with your clients. For example, you might say, "Now here's what I'm hearing that you would like me to do . . ." or "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that what you would like me to do is . . ." Never forget to listen before you leap!

