

Consultants: The Trainer's Friend

And vice versa.

By Anver Suleiman



onsultants are brought into organizations to solve problems, change approaches, increase sales, reduce costs, improve quality, find opportunity, and generally improve the organization's ability to grow and prosper for all of its constituencies—employees, shareholders, customers, and society. *Wow!* Change for the better. Isn't that what we in training are all about? Preparing for and implementing change, helping those kinds of changes take place more effectively, and building healthy, robust organizations.

Consultants come in all sizes and shapes: solos, small firms, big firms, and technical, management, marketing, manufacturing, engineering, communications, teambuilding, Six Sigma. Consultants also work in so many ways: assignments, on retainer, as evaluators, as recommenders, implementing, training, learning, performance. How else do we as individuals and organizations implement change, adapt, adopt, and grow?

Here is a starter list of just some of the ways that workplace learning and performance professionals uniquely and specifically can help organizations leverage the use of consultants.

Let management know that we can help them find consultants. We know who they are, where they are, and how they have performed elsewhere. Or at least we know how to find out through peers, directories, previous experiences, other consultants, and associations—such as ASTD and ASAE, *Gale's Directory of Consultants*, industry-niche magazines, and search engines on the Web.

Ask management to let us get involved in the selection process (perhaps with HR)—not as approvers, but as an additional available and valuable resource to provide input to help make the best possible choices. We can help determine a consultant's ability to fit, understand, and advise, and we can check references. We can also prep a consultant to increase the likelihood that he or she will deliver optimum performance.

Many consultants will want to train the training staff to implement specific recommendations. That's only natural. **We can assist** with facilities and training materials, as well as help coordinate, prepare, determine learning outcomes, and present effectively. After all, we've been training our folks all along. Working with a consultant is no different; just the content will be different. In every sense of the word, the consultant, in this role, becomes an integral part of our learning activity.

We can make a consultant's job easier, more effective, and better for the organization. **Identify the training and people-related issues.** Let the consultant know of previous successes and failures. Help him or her understand the culture, specific people, and the structure and way work is accomplished in the organization—and why some efforts have failed. No need for repetition.

We can **offer to review reports, contribute to meetings designed to implement change, and help with problem solving** because we training folks have an unusual, often uncanny, ability to relate to people—their skills and knowledge, and how they best learn and grow. That's what we're all about, and we often don't have to be in the approval loop. We just need to provide super-timely input to help management make even smarter and more informed business decisions.

The next time you hear think "friend." Think partner.

We can alert consultants to those instances in which their recommendations might meet resistance, and why—and then how they might modify those recommendations to gain acceptance—enthusiastic acceptance—and smoother implementation. Helping consultants succeed is the same as helping the organization succeed.

We can provide consultants and management with an ongoing stream of timely communications designed to evaluate—which we're expert at—and, more important, to fuel the progress and accomplishments brought about by the changes being recommended. And we can monitor them so we might adjust as needed.

Depending on the nature of the consulting assignment, people involved, and duration, the learning function can also take the initiative to manage the process, the relationship, and the negotiations. Just offering those options to senior management will always be welcomed and will reinforce the value of the learning function in the overall strategic planning for the organization.

At right is a list of key documents and suggestions that workplace learning and performance professionals can offer to functional and senior managers in advance of retaining a consultant. Those tasks show how the training department might specifically assist in the preparation for, and implementation of, beneficial changes for the organization. Management can then select from those optional services.

The next time you hear the word “consultant,” think “friend.” Think partner. Think opportunity. Think growth, quality, and efficiency for the organization. And think of how valuable a role you can play. In fact, maybe the title of this article should be “Trainers: The Consultant’s Friend.” **TD**

Learning Function Services

Here's a sampling of what workplace learning and performance professionals can do to make working with consultants successful.

- Provide a list of potential consultants and consulting firms.
- Screen consultants.
- Work on the engagement agreement.
- Communicate the training requirements, desired outcomes, costs, timelines, and so forth.
- Suggest consulting (internal or external) assignments.
- Send ongoing alerts to problems, issues, and opportunities.

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