

1 **Consulting Mastery: How the Best Make the Biggest Difference**

2 **By Keith Merron**

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4 This article is based on interviews with 14 consultants who were nominated by a panel of  
5 experts as being the “best consultant I ever worked with.” In addition, it is based on  
6 interviews with 10 executives of companies each of whom had significant experience in  
7 working with many consultants. I asked them to describe the best consultant they had  
8 ever worked with. Their combined insights along with my 25 years of experience form  
9 the basis of this article and a book to be published by Berrett-Koehler, Inc. in May, 2005  
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13 **O**ver a century ago, the field of medicine experienced a breakthrough when  
14 germs were discovered to be the primary cause of many illnesses. This understanding  
15 replaced the outdated theory that most medical problems existed as a result of “bad  
16 blood”. So too when Einstein discovered the law of relativity and quantum physics  
17 replaced the Newtonian understanding of the physical world. The world of human  
18 dynamics has been much slower to change.

19 In spite of the overwhelming evidence that psychological ownership of change is  
20 crucial to make any kind of human change process happen, businesses and the consulting  
21 profession as a whole remain wedded to the idea that consultants can come in as knights  
22 on a white horse to save the day. Rarely is this the case. Consultants that try this  
23 approach leave a wake of mediocrity and at the same time continue to blame the client for  
24 not implementing their recommendations. Clients that look for “the answer” from  
25 consultants participate in the very same “savior game” and yet rarely implement the

26 recommended changes. They blame the consultant for not giving them “real life”  
27 answers to their problems. Both client and consultant fail to recognize that both are  
28 caught in a paradigm destined to produce limited results.

29       Take a look at the number of consulting reports collecting dust on some  
30 executive’s bookshelf. The number is staggering. In spite of this, clients continue to turn  
31 to consultants in hopes that the next time the outcome will be different. Consultants offer  
32 promises that is not within their capability and power to deliver.

33       There are growing indicators that the consulting profession is no longer meeting  
34 the needs of its clients well. They include:

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- 35           1. Demand for consulting is declining, and as a result, consulting firms are  
36           being forced to downsize.
- 37           2. Many consulting firms are falling out of favor as their practices are  
38           subjected to deeper scrutiny. Witness the Andersen Consulting debacle  
39           with Enron.
- 40           3. More and more books have been published that debunk the sovereignty  
41           of the consulting profession.<sup>1</sup>
- 42           4. Consulting firms are bidding on more projects and winning far fewer,  
43           while simultaneously experiencing an increase in their sales cycle and a  
44           decline in their average engagement size.<sup>2</sup>

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46 I believe these trends are a direct outgrowth of the fundamental model upon which most  
47 consulting firms base their practice.

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49 **The Typical Consulting Model**

50 Every day, throughout the country, clients and consultants are participating in a  
51 silent and powerful contract. This contract is silent precisely because both consultant and  
52 client are often unaware of its existence. At the core of any consulting activity is the  
53 desire by the client to get help and by the consultant to offer help.

54 Out of the consultant's desire to help and the client's desire to be saved is born the  
55 "savior strategy." To occur, the savior strategy requires two consenting parties—  
56 helpers and the receivers of help. The helpers must be motivated to help and also believe  
57 they a better way. The receivers of help must want to be saved, must believe they are  
58 capable of changing, and also that the helpers have a magic elixir obtainable only from  
59 the helpers.

60 Many consulting firms are brilliant at playing the savior game and preying on the  
61 fears of client systems that, without the firm's help, the company is either doomed or in  
62 deep weeds. To be fair, both participate in the same implied contract. You, the client,  
63 need help. I have what you need. I'll sell it to you, and then you'll have it.

64 It sounds so wonderful. But the negative consequences of the implied contract can  
65 be severe. Once the consultant leaves, the client system will often *not* have more  
66 knowledge than it had before, because knowledge – the consultant's stock in trade --  
67 cannot be given away. You can give people information; it's like giving them a bag of  
68 groceries. But knowledge transfers less easily. In the realm of human and organizational  
69 dynamics, knowledge must be learned and earned through exploration, deep shared  
70 thinking, and often struggle.

71            Yet in spite of this, clients are happy to pay for information and to expect positive  
72 results. This willingness to be “done to” and be “given to” is natural. Most organizations  
73 are overwhelmed, and look for the quick fix. Consultants are happy to oblige.

74            This savior strategy in turn, produces secondary strategies. They are:

- 75            1. Create a “power over” relationship to client.
- 76            2. Claim and use specialized knowledge, processes, tools, and techniques as  
77            the primary added value.
- 78            3. Develop presentation and sales skills for gaining more business.

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### 80 **The Goals and Strategies of Masterful Consultants**

81            While much research exists on the practice of consulting, the profession is still  
82 far more art than science. Like a great painter, the master consultant relies on more than  
83 simple technique. He knows that each client situation is unique—a blank canvas.

84            While there are principles to guide his actions, he must create anew the process and the  
85 relationship to produce the greatest effect. Where the painter works with paintbrush and  
86 palette, the masterful consultant works with “self.”

87            All good consultants have an inventory of theories, models, tools and techniques  
88 to draw on. Without them, most would be lost. Yet what differentiates the master  
89 consultant from others has nothing to do with this inventory. It has all to do with the  
90 “feel” of the situation, with the ability to act effectively in the moment. It has much more  
91 to do with the ability to be “in the moment”—to sense what is going on in a given  
92 situation and then take the action that meets that moment.

93 To understand mastery in the consulting profession, we need to recognize that  
94 mastery starts from the primary goal of wanting to impact the fundamental patterns that  
95 shape organizations and help make them better. Every organization is driven by a set of  
96 *patterns*. The way we hold meetings has a pattern. The way we communicate has a  
97 pattern. Our leadership style has a pattern. These patterns form, mold, and harden until  
98 they become the very culture of organizations. **The principal goal** of a masterful  
99 consultant is to help an organization grow, shift, change, or transform is by impacting the  
100 fundamental patterns characteristic of that organization.

101 To accomplish this goal, all of the masterful consultants I interviewed employ a  
102 primary strategy best characterized as an **empowering partnership**—one designed to  
103 shift the client system to a new level of health and performance. An empowering  
104 partnership is one where both consultant and client are touched by each other. Together,  
105 they create an authentic, vulnerable relationship, where the client, the process, and the  
106 relationship itself are all explored, deepened, and enhanced. They see their work together  
107 as co-creative, every bit as imaginative as it is well designed. They form a learning  
108 relationship where the organization is profoundly moved as a result. Scottish philosopher  
109 David Hume said it well when he wrote: “The sweetest path of life leads through the  
110 avenues of learning, and whoever can open up the way for another, ought, so far, to be  
111 esteemed a benefactor to mankind.” This avenue of learning traveled by an empowered  
112 relationship is the heart of the master consultant’s primary strategy.

113 Following this primary strategy, masterful consultants use three secondary  
114 strategies.

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- 116 1. They develop a client-centered partnership.  
117 2. They share knowledge openly and freely.  
118 3. They see their quality of “being” as a catalyst for transformation and  
119 learning.

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121 Interviews with savvy clients and masterful consultants alike, combined with my  
122 own experience tell me that consultants who follow this path consistently produce more  
123 effective outcomes in the client organizations. They do so not because they have come in  
124 to “save the day,” but because they appreciate that in the end, it is the client who must  
125 participate in and own the process and the outcome of any change effort for it to  
126 ultimately be successful. The art of masterful consulting is to engage with clients in a  
127 way that adds value through ones knowledge and facilitative capability, while never  
128 telling the client what to do or how to do it. Consultants that are seduced by their own or  
129 the client’s desire for “answers” feel heroic in the moment, yet rarely produce lasting  
130 change.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Mintzberg, H. (1994). *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York: The Free Press; Micklethwait, J. & Wooldridge, A. (1996). *The Witch Doctors: making sense of the management gurus*. New York: Random House; O’Shea, J. & Madigan, C. (1997). *Dangerous Company: consultants and the businesses they save and ruin*. New York: Times Books.

<sup>2</sup> Consulting News