

1 **The Savior Syndrome: clients and consultants colluding in a losing**
2 **game and what they can do about it**

3 **By Keith Merron**

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5 This article is intended to examine the fundamental presuppositions embedded in the
6 relationship between most clients and the consultants they hire. In looking deep into the
7 that relationship, the article suggests that it is limited and destined for mediocrity. In
8 contrast, this article offers an alternative, one that is held by a number of clients and
9 consultants who march to a different beat and who are making a profound difference in
10 the target organizations. It is based on interviews with 14 consultants who were
11 nominated by a panel of experts as being the “best consultant I ever worked with.” In
12 these interviews I learned what makes them “tick”, how they see their work, and what
13 they believe differentiates their work for the countless others who ply their trade in the
14 consulting profession. In addition, I interviewed 10 executives of companies each of
15 whom had significant experience in working with many consultants. To them I asked a
16 similar question: to describe the best consultant they had ever worked with. Their
17 combined insights along with my 25 years of experience form the basis of this article and
18 a book entitled *Consulting Mastery: How the Best Make the Biggest Difference* to be
19 published by Berrett-Koehler, Inc. in Spring, 2005.
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22 **O**ver a century ago, the field of medicine experienced a breakthrough when
23 germs were discovered to be the cause of many illnesses. This understanding replaced
24 the outdated theory that most medical problems existed as a result of “bad blood”. So too
25 when Einstein discovered the law of relativity and quantum physics replaced the
26 Newtonian understanding of the physical world. In science, paradigm shifts occur
27 regularly. The world of human dynamics in organizations has been much slower to
28 change.

29 In spite of the overwhelming evidence that psychological ownership of change is
30 crucial to make any kind of human change process happen, businesses and the consulting

31 profession as a whole remain wedded to the idea that consultants can come in like knights
32 on a white horse to save the day. Rarely is this the case. Clients that look for “the
33 answer” from consultants participate in this “savior game” and yet rarely implement the
34 recommended changes. When things go awry in the consulting process, they blame the
35 consultant for not giving them “real life” answers to their problems. Consultants, in turn,
36 blame the client for not implementing their recommendations. Both client and consultant
37 fail to recognize that both are caught in a relationship destined to produce limited results.

38 Take a look at the number of consulting reports collecting dust on many
39 executives’ bookshelves. The number is staggering. In spite of this, clients continue to
40 turn to consultants in hopes that the next time the outcome will be different. Consultants
41 continue to make promises that are not within their capability and power to deliver.

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44 **The Typical Consulting Model**

45 Every day, throughout the country, clients and consultants are participating in a
46 silent and powerful contract. This contract is silent precisely because both clients and
47 consultants are often unaware of its existence. This contract is driven by the assumptions
48 they hold about the nature and process of consulting. To understand this, it is helpful to
49 break down the consulting process to its bare essence.

50 At the core of any consulting activity is the desire by the client to get help and by
51 the consultant to offer help. Out of the consultant’s desire to help and the client’s desire
52 to be saved is born the “savior strategy.” To occur, the savior strategy requires two
53 consenting parties—the helper and the receiver of help. The helper must be motivated to

54 help and also believe she has a better way. The receiver of help must want to be saved,
55 must believe he is capable of changing, and also that the helper has a magic elixir
56 obtainable only from the helper.

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

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

68 Yet in spite of this, clients are happy to pay for information and to expect positive
69 results. This willingness to be "done to" and be "given to" is natural. Most organizations
70 are overwhelmed, and look for the quick fix. Consultants are happy to oblige.

71 In their desire to be fixed, clients get hooked by the promises many consultants
72 make and more often than not get sold a bill of goods. Together, client and consultant
73 weave a relationship where the client takes little ownership for the results and can blame
74 the consultant if results are not forthcoming. Throughout the country this dance is played
75 over and over again, with limited results.

76 The limited effect of most consulting efforts have been known for a while. Ten
77 years ago, for example, Nitin Nohria and J.D. Berkeley found that in the majority of
78 cases, research shows that many of the fads, including TQM, Process Reengineering,
79 MBO, and others “rarely produced the promised results.¹ Notably as well is the myriad
80 of articles in the early 90s showing how TQM efforts too often fell well short of their
81 aims. Most of the research on the subject suggests that less than 1/4 of the TQM efforts
82 produced tangible and enduring results.²

83 In spite of the apparent growing failure rate, organizations and consultants alike
84 continue to seek the next big thing. Consultants claim extraordinary knowledge and
85 clients lap it up. Together they often fail to question that change cannot happen through
86 knowledge alone. The problem is that rarely are the underlying assumptions of the
87 typical client/consultant relationship examined.

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89 **Questionable Assumptions**

90 One fundamental assumption, for example, is that knowledge, and the structured
91 transfer of knowledge, is the most appropriate thing a consultant can offer. Is it, though?
92 It may in fact be the *least* essential thing we can offer. Perhaps it only provides the
93 *illusion* of comfort. Perhaps they are only peddling the appearance of a useful
94 methodology, as Harold Hill fraudulently peddled the "think theory" of music in O.
95 Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*.

96 Another unquestioned assumption is that there is magic in tools and techniques.
97 Consultants unfailingly cite them, and the authority from which they derive, rarely
98 exploring whether these tools really make a difference. Clients and consultants alike

99 jump on the next bandwagon of consulting ideas, hoping to find that elusive magic pill.
100 Rarely do those who follow this path recognize that real solutions do not lie in magic
101 pills. Clients often want easy answers, and many consulting firms are all too eager to
102 send young consultants, still wet behind the ears, to dish them out. The results are too
103 often disappointing to the client. One CEO I know, for example, refuses to hire
104 consultants any more. He is tired of them trying to sell him their “approach.” He knows
105 that there is no one answer, and is suspicious of anyone offering it. Another senior
106 executive I know says her company is “consultant phobic.” She says, “We are tired of
107 consultants promising the world, and not delivering.” These clients are on to something,
108 yet don’t know where to turn to. Sadly, they are missing out on a relationship that could
109 help them grow and develop.

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111 Tools and techniques give us comfort; they
112 have nothing to do with consulting mastery.
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114 Perhaps the biggest assumption of all is the belief that the goal of consulting is to
115 provide advice toward solving problems, failing to recognize that the real challenge most
116 clients face is in producing the change itself. Robert Shaffer said it well when he said
117 that the trouble is that most consultants “don’t make client implementation a central focus
118 of their consulting practices. Most are almost completely dedicated to providing
119 managers with insights and ideas about change; they pay virtually no attention to helping
120 the client *effect* change.”³

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122 **The Rules Behind the Rules**

123 The rules of the typical consultant game are rather straightforward. You have a
124 problem, I offer a solution. You pay me to deliver that solution. On the face of it, the
125 rules seem solid. Yet if you were to peer behind the scenes of the consulting game as
126 typically played, you would find a game behind a game. Few consultants and consulting
127 firms want clients to know about what is behind the scenes, for if they did, many clients
128 would not hire them. The rules of the game behind the game are designed to make the
129 most money for the consultant or the consulting firm, often the detriment of client
130 outcomes. The game behind the game has the following rules:

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- 132 • Rather than offer unique solutions, listen to understand the problem in such a way
133 that you can prove your predefined solution fits the client's problem
- 134 • Proclaim specialized knowledge, even if it is not well developed nor unique
- 135 • Convince the client that they are in trouble if they don't use you and come in like
136 a hero to save the day
- 137 • See change management as something you bolt on to the process rather than the
138 greatest challenge in the process
- 139 • Leverage young talent at high margins to make a lot of money
- 140 • Collect your fee, regardless of the outcome

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142 Together, the assumptions described above and the behind the scenes rules cause
143 consultants to operate in a way that have a high payoff for the consultants and a limited
144 payoff for the client. Leaders of organizations that produce significantly greater results

145 do not get sucked in by consultants offering promises they cannot deliver. They take
146 responsibility for the consulting effort and partner with the consultant at each step along
147 the way.

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150 **The Goals and Strategies of Clients Who Produce Greater Results When Hiring**
151 **Consultants**

152 The goals of leaders who work with consultants successfully have to do with the
153 desire to make enduring change in their organizations—to create a learning process
154 where they can elevate their company to new heights of effectiveness. Leaders of
155 organizations who are successful in this realm do not want to be saved. Instead they
156 welcome guidance. They seek consultants who are good at facilitating, asking powerful
157 questions, and helping them see their own leadership and its effect on the organization as
158 a whole. Instead of colluding in a savior strategy they seek to form an empowering
159 relationship with the consultant.

160 These very same leaders seek savvy and seasoned consultants who don't promise
161 knowledge or results they can't deliver. Instead, they seek consultants who have a good
162 "feel" of the situation, with the ability to act effectively in the moment. They seek
163 consultants committed to help an organization grow, shift, change, or transform by
164 impacting the fundamental patterns characteristic of that organization.

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166 **The Anatomy of a Powerful Client/Consultant Relationship**

167 An empowering partnership is one where both consultant and client are touched
168 by each other. Together, they create an authentic, vulnerable relationship, where the
169 client, the process, and the relationship itself are all explored, deepened, and enhanced.
170 They see their work together as co-creative, every bit as imaginative as it is well
171 designed. They form a learning relationship where the organization is profoundly moved
172 as a result.

173 “The sweetest path of life leads through the avenues of
174 learning, and whoever can open up the way for
175 another, ought, so far, to be esteemed a benefactor to
mankind.”

David Hume, Scottish philosopher

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178 Interviews with savvy clients and masterful consultants alike, combined with my
179 own experience, tell me that consultants who follow this path consistently produce more
180 effective outcomes in the client organizations. They do so not because they expect the
181 consultant to “save the day,” but because they appreciate that in the end, it is the client
182 who must participate in and own the process and the outcome of any change effort for it
183 to ultimately be successful.

184 Leaders of organizations who understand this are hiring consultants for different
185 reasons than the ones most leaders follow. Instead of seeking to be fixed, they seek to
186 learn. They use consultants to offer perspectives and guidance that create conditions
187 where their organizations can learn, and do so more rapidly than their competitors. The
188 best leaders do not give power over to the consultant and wait for magic to occur. They

189 partner with their consultants to form a process where greater insight can occur and
190 clearer sustainable change can take place.

191 To understand this, let's look at an example of the ineffective cycle that clients
192 and consultants participate in.

193 Thom went to meet with a potential new client, a division of a large software
194 development company. The head of the division, Christine, and two of her direct reports
195 were seeking a consultant to help them become a high-performing team and better leaders
196 of their division. In the previous four years, they had worked with three different
197 consultants. They had been disappointed in the results: in each case, the consultant didn't
198 deliver what they expected. The first consultant was fairly knowledgeable, but the
199 mountain of information she unloaded on them did not help them become more effective
200 as a team. The second had a lot of nifty exercises, and everyone enjoyed doing them—
201 but in the end, that made no difference either. The third confronted them repeatedly and
202 was rather abrasive, so they deemed him ineffectual and discarded him.

203 After hearing of their consulting frustrations, it became clear to Thom that the
204 problem was not the consultants per se. Nor was it the team, for Thom could see they
205 were eager to be helped. The problem was in the relationship between the two. The
206 executive team's description of what they wanted strongly suggested they were looking
207 for a magic pill to address their needs. It was as if they were expecting something to be
208 done *to* them, not *with* them.

209 And so, unwittingly, each consultant took turns playing the savior game. Each
210 appreciated the client's enthusiasm, and welcomed the opportunity to ply their trade.
211 While trying to act like facilitators, they wound up acting like experts, in the sense of

212 providing something vital the client needed, for a price. Each colluded with the executive
213 team's desire to be saved.

214 After hearing their story about failed efforts, Thom offered his diagnosis of why
215 the consulting efforts did not work well. Thom challenged their expectations and
216 proposed a different kind of relationship; one based on shared responsibility and shared
217 ownership. He helped them see what was missing in the other relationships, as well as
218 the role they played in their own disappointed results. This appealed to Christine, in
219 particular, and Thom was hired.

220 If one is willing to question the assumptions upon which most consulting
221 processes are built, the reason why the first three consultants did not work starts to reveal
222 itself. The model they all followed is simple—and misses the mark. Consultant offers
223 knowledge for a fee. Client pays for that knowledge, and the knowledge is (supposedly)
224 transferred. In the case above, the knowledge came in the form of content, team-building
225 exercises, and confrontation—information, tools, and technique. All of these approaches
226 put the responsibility for change squarely in the hands of the consultants. No matter how
227 effective the consultants may be, no matter how clever, they would not be able to turn the
228 client into a high-performing team. Nor could they ever. Their knowledge was fine, but
229 their approach was way off-target.

230 The typical client/consultant contract—pay in exchange for consulting
231 knowledge—seems self-evident when the transaction is put so simply put. And because
232 it seems so obvious, some of the counterproductive features underlying this contract go
233 unexamined. One major feature embedded in the exchange, for example, is a relationship

234 of power: the consultant or consulting firm is “one-up” in power in relationship to the
235 client. I/we know something you don’t, and therefore have power over you. .

236 This relationship of power is often played out in much the same way as a parent
237 might guide a child. The consultant (parent) claims to have knowledge the client (child)
238 seeks. The client, hungry for the knowledge says, in effect, “give it to me” (put me
239 through your process). Typically the client (child) does not take responsibility for the
240 process, which makes sense since the consultant (parent) has promised that if the client
241 follows the consultant’s lead, the client will reap benefits.

242 In this exchange, the client/child has surrendered its power to the
243 consultant/parent. In surrendering, the client takes little ownership of the process, and is
244 therefore less likely to implement the consultant’s solutions. When that implementation
245 does not occur—or goes sour—the client can easily blame the consultant and wash its
246 hands of responsibility. “If only the consultant had delivered the goods, we would be
247 fine.” Yet the consultant can also wash her hands of responsibility as well by claiming,
248 “If only the client had listened to me, the consulting process would have succeeded.”
249 Both feel justified in their blame and, at the same time, are often unaware that they
250 engaged in a power relationship fraught with pitfalls. This relationship is rarely
251 examined, yet it typifies almost every consultant-client situation in which the
252 expert/structured approach to consulting is offered in exchange for money.

253 One reason this relationship goes unexamined is that it worked quite well in a
254 world where change was slow, and efficiency was the primary driver of business success.
255 But the world has changed, so much so that in most cases, structured, knowledge-based
256 approaches no longer fit the business world these approaches are tailored for.

257 The other extreme, a client relationship in which the consultant gives away all his
258 power, is also beset with problems. Too often consultants, particularly those who see
259 themselves purely process facilitators, withhold their own point of view, or manipulate
260 the client to their own ends under the guise of facilitation. For example, some use
261 Socratic questioning strategies when in fact they know the answers in advance.

262 Leaders and consultants who create extraordinary results in their change processes
263 avoid both of these extremes: “power over” or abdication of power. Instead it has to do
264 with sharing power between the leaders and the consultant, and co-ownership of the
265 consulting process.

266 **A success story.** The client was a medium-sized company in the insurance
267 business, which had stagnated in a highly conservative industry. Alex, the company’s
268 CEO, brought in Sally and a team of consultants to help shift the organization’s culture
269 and make it a much stronger player in their industry.

270 To begin, Sally spent a lot of time helping the client understand that the client had
271 to “own” the culture change process for it to work. She explained that she and the other
272 members of the consulting team were simply agents and guides. It was the client’s
273 responsibility to make it happen. Both Sally and Alex had a genuine belief that the client
274 was responsible for the results. She embodied this belief in a number of ways. For
275 example, whenever she sensed a member of the client organization was hesitant, she
276 asked that person why, and then respected it as a natural reservation rather than
277 confronting the person in a sales-like manner. She also helped Alex listen to his own
278 intuition, and adjusted the change process accordingly. In addition, rather than push
279 differing views of change onto the senior management team, she helped them come to

280 solutions that often respected their own dissent. She didn't see people as "resisting
281 change" or "dragging their feet." She saw them as having legitimate concerns that
282 needed to be addressed.

283 Alex, in turn, was deeply committed to helping his organization grow and change,
284 and was clear that it was his responsibility. Over time, he made it clear to his executive
285 team and the organization that the change effort was indeed theirs, for better or worse.
286 Sally was a trusted advisor, but Alex and the organization as a whole remained in the
287 driver seat. A significant event occurred about eight months into the project, one that
288 would have sounded a death knell for almost any other significant change. The Board
289 removed Alex, the CEO who had brought Sally and her consulting team in. The
290 prevailing sentiment was that he lacked the horsepower to lead the company through the
291 growth process, and was not the leader of the future. This decision came in spite of the
292 positive momentum that seemed to be taking shape.

293 A new CEO was brought in, one who had never led a company before, but had a
294 track record of success at a much larger competitor. The new CEO, Mark, showed no
295 interest in the culture change effort at first. He viewed such efforts as "touchy-feely
296 fluff." A hard-nosed businessman with a powerful, analytical mind and a nose for
297 numbers, he was also very achievement driven, wanting to succeed in his new effort as
298 CEO.

299 In spite of his own inclination to put the brakes on the culture change effort and
300 replace it with a more disciplined "manage by the numbers" approach, he was impressed
301 by the enthusiasm among the leadership team and rank and file for the culture change.

302 So rather than make the act of blocking a perceived positive effort his first statement as
303 new CEO, he decided to let it ride, at least for the time being.

304 After witnessing Sally facilitate some key meetings, he began to see her as a
305 potential ally. In short order, he instituted regular meetings with his senior team designed
306 to continue to build their teamwork, and began having Sally coach him to become a better
307 CEO. Mark impressed Sally with his genuine openness, his integrity, and his interest in
308 improving his leadership skills. Rather than “selling” Mark on the change effort, she
309 asked him to consider two things: (1) the change effort could go on without him, but it
310 would be far stronger with Mark in the lead; (2) if Mark were to lead it, he would have to
311 do so genuinely, and put his own “stamp” on it.

312 After thinking it over, Mark elected to lead the change effort, and made a
313 commitment to become an effective CEO and the leader of the change process, with
314 Sally’s guidance. Sally’s work with Mark and the team lasted almost two years, during
315 which the company moved from being an also-ran to being one of the leaders in the
316 industry. Many changes took place including breakthrough profitability, a shift in culture
317 from a rather complacent employee population to one of high initiative, and improved
318 teamwork throughout the system. Eventually, another industry leader bought out the
319 company, but not before it earned strong revenues—and strong profits—in a wilting
320 insurance market.

321

322 **It’s All About Relationship**

323 This example illustrates what masterful consultants and successful clients know
324 well. While the client must own the outcome, both client and consultant must own the

325 process—together. For the client to own the process exclusively takes all responsibility
326 away from the consultant and denies an important part of his added value—to guide the
327 process. For the consultant to own the process exclusively, on the other hand, divorces
328 the client from his responsibility for the outcome, and denies the fact that each client is
329 unique, and its knowledge of itself is critical to the process. Given the importance of
330 shared ownership, the most crucial factor for success is clearly the relationship between
331 consultant and client. And the essence of the relationship for masterful consulting is one
332 of *partnership*.

333 Partnership means that *the consultant is committed to his clients and they to him*.
334 They are engaged in a mutually satisfying, mutually beneficial relationship in which a
335 particular exchange must take place and in the process, the client must be improved.
336 Partnership means that both client and consultant operate from the following set of
337 principles or commitments relative to the client organization and the individuals within it:

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- 339 ✓ Both client and consultant are committed to the client's well-being and
- 340 effectiveness
- 341 ✓ We expect each other to tell the truth
- 342 ✓ We expect each other to act in integrity
- 343 ✓ We recognize that to be successful in the process, each of us has to be successful
- 344 ✓ We encourage each other to be our best and give and get feedback to support this.
- 345 ✓ Nothing is held back. We put our hearts into this relationship and to an effective
- 346 outcome.

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348 These principles are, not surprisingly, reminiscent of the Christian concept of Agape and
349 Martin Buber's view of an I/Thou relationship.⁴

350 Almost all of the masterful consultants I interviewed spoke with great passion
351 about this issue of partnership:

352

353 One of the other things I feel strongly about is that the relationship with
354 the client is a partnership. I don't assume I have the answer or solution,
355 but will continuously try options and give the client a good deal. I feel in
356 partnership with them and share the responsibility for what occurs.

357

358 If you were talking to a friend, you would never use language like "own
359 the process." I actually believe for the complexity and the anxiety that are
360 now growing in all our lives together, it isn't about taking ownership. It's
361 about being together, trying to figure it out. A young Danish woman gave
362 an image to me. She said, "I feel like we're holding hands, walking into a
363 dark forest." That describes the kind of relationship with the client I seek.

364

365 Many clients I interviewed, as well, attached the same importance to partnership.
366 One client put it this way when reflecting on the best consultant he had ever worked with:

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368 She was stronger than other consultants; had more hands-on experience, a deeper
369 character, was willing to stand firm when necessary and call me on my own
370 issues. But the thing that stood out for me was that I felt like I had a friend. She

371 brings a whole bag of tricks and skills, but more than that it's the relationship she
372 built with me that made this other stuff so useful.

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For the greatest effect, the client must "own" the
outcome while together client and consultant jointly
own the process

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378 Too often, the reason consulting efforts do not achieve significant outcomes is
379 that the consultant and the client view it as an exchange. I give you money and you
380 provide me a service. I give you a recommendation and you implement it. Such an
381 exchange works when the service is easily "wrapped in a package." A massage, a
382 shoeshine, or weeding your garden are all services for which little mutuality and
383 collaboration are required. Too often, the consulting process is treated in the same
384 manner. Hence, little synergy occurs.

385 By contrast, a successful consulting engagement is characterized by a true
386 partnership between client and consultant with significant amounts of learning between
387 the two. It is often messy and fraught with pitfalls. Rarely is the answer truly obvious.
388 If it were, it would likely not require the client to seek help. If the problems faced in
389 consulting situations are knotty, complex, and challenging, then the quality of the
390 relationship needs to be characterized by shared learning. Partnership and shared
391 ownership are the only goals worth attaining if the client and consultant aim to achieve
392 truly enduring results.

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¹ N. Nohria and J. D. Berkley, "Whatever Happened to the Take Charge Manager?" *Harvard Business Review*, Jan.-Feb. 1994, pp. 128-137.

² "The Cracks in Quality," *Economist*, Apr. 18, 1992.

³ R. Schaffer (2002). *High Impact Consulting: how clients and consultants can work together to achieve extraordinary results*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, p. 9.

⁴ I am grateful to Frank Basler for having pointed this out to me.