

The Keys to HR Consulting Mastery

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 published by Berrett-Koehler, Inc. in May, 2005.
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13 In spite of overwhelming evidence that psychological ownership of change is
14 crucial to any kind of human change process, businesses and the consulting profession
15 remain wedded to the idea that consultants can come in as knights on a white horse to
16 save the day. Rarely is this the case. Human Resource consultants who try this approach
17 often leave behind a wake of mediocrity yet continue to blame the client for not
18 implementing their recommendations. Clients who look for “the answer” from
19 consultants rarely implement the recommended changes. They blame the consultant for
20 not giving them “real life” answers to their problems. Both client and consultant fail to
21 recognize they are caught in a paradigm destined to produce limited results.

22 Human Resources consultants who exhibit mastery in the art of consulting rarely
23 fall prey to this syndrome. Instead they operate from a different model and as a result
24 produce appreciably far greater and more sustainable results. To understand this, let’s
25 look at the key features of consulting mastery.
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27 **The Goals and Strategies of Masterful Consultants**

28 Consulting mastery starts from the primary goal of wanting to impact the
29 fundamental patterns that shape organizations and help make them better. Every
30 organization is driven by a set of *patterns*. The way we hold meetings has a pattern. The
31 way we communicate has a pattern. Our leadership style has a pattern. These patterns
32 form, mold, and harden until they become the very culture of organizations. **The**
33 **principal goal** of a masterful HR consultant is to **help an organization grow, shift,**
34 **change, or transform** by impacting the fundamental human resources related patterns
35 characteristic of that organization.

36 To accomplish this goal, all of the masterful consultants I interviewed employ a
37 primary strategy best characterized as an **empowering partnership**—one designed to
38 shift the client system to a new level of health and performance. An empowering
39 partnership is one where both consultant and client are touched by each other. Together,
40 they create an authentic, vulnerable relationship, where the client, the process, and the
41 relationship itself are all explored, deepened, and enhanced. They see their work together
42 as co-creative, every bit as imaginative as it is well designed. They form a learning
43 relationship where the organization is profoundly moved as a result.

44 Following this primary strategy, masterful HR consultants use three secondary
45 strategies.

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47 1. They develop a client-centered partnership.

48 2. They share knowledge openly and freely.

49 3. They see their quality of “being” as a catalyst for transformation and
50 learning.

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52 **A client-centered partnership.** The empowering relationship the masterful
53 consultant forms with his client system may be obvious to many, but it is also difficult to
54 attain. While many HR consultants espouse the importance of the client owning the
55 process, and of creating a true partnership with the client, their behavior, too often, tells
56 another story.

57 A masterful HR consultant’s powerful belief in the importance of keeping the
58 client in the driver seat keeps his or her behavior congruent with these beliefs. It’s a
59 conscious process, one that calls for rigorous self-observation. Masterful HR consultants
60 seek a lot of feedback, and to minimize their own unconscious patterns that might result
61 in taking power away from their client systems. In other words, they walk their
62 empowering talk. Masterful HR consultant will more often ask questions than give
63 answers. They act as a facilitator, committed to having the client think the process
64 through for themselves. They might offer a model, but at the same time readily accept
65 one of theirs for implementation if it achieves the outcomes of ownership and committed
66 action.

67 Owning the outcome is one of three features of the client relationship that a
68 masterful HR consultant forms. In addition, the masterful HR consultant treats the whole
69 system as the client, and wisely negotiates the dilemmas posed when the person paying
70 the consultant acts inconsistently with the needs of the whole system.

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72 **Sharing knowledge.** Brilliant thinking does not make a great consultant.

73 Brilliant thinking may impress, and indeed may be essential to mastery, but it
74 doesn't empower. Instead, all of the masterful consultants I interviewed
75 displayed an impressive amount of emotional intelligence. Their ability to
76 understand their clients from a human standpoint, to see client problems more
77 clearly, to help them make sense of their own organization, and work with them to
78 the point where true change occurs is what separates them from the pack. Most
79 consultants have the requisite knowledge and analytic capability. Few have the
80 emotional intelligence to produce lasting change in their client systems.

81 In this day and age, both good and masterful consultants are usually adequately
82 equipped with expert knowledge in their field, and are able to communicate their
83 knowledge effectively. In the knowledge arena, what distinguishes masterful HR
84 consultants is the way in which they hold and use knowledge. They hold their knowledge
85 with certainty and confidence, not arrogance. When they communicate, they describe
86 the complex set of unfolding dynamics in a way that creates clarity out of confusion.

87 **Character matters.** The quality of character of masterful HR consultants is
88 evident in how they talk, how they relate to others, and how they act. Behind these
89 behaviors must be integrity, confidence, and humility. Behind this, deeper still, must be
90 strong self-esteem, often borne of years of self-reflection and intense inner work.

91 In my experience, masterful consultants strive to live by 4 key principles.

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The Masterful Consultant's Principles of Conduct

1. Always tell the truth, at the deepest levels
2. Commit to learning—for self and for the client
3. Bring my whole self in full partnership
4. Play a big game

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Figure 1: Principles of Conduct of the Masterful Consultant

105 **Always tell the truth** means being honest with one's self and with others at all
106 times.

107 **Commit to learning** has to do with spending far more time and energy exploring
108 issues than in offering answers.

109 **Bring my whole self** has to do with being vulnerable and with being whole—
110 mind, body, and spirit.

111 **Play a big game** means working with others to make a larger difference. Great
112 HR consultants don't get embroiled in either/or thinking. They focus on ways of working
113 that expand possibilities, produce win-win outcomes, and open up vistas clients were not
114 even aware of.

115 Interviews with savvy clients and masterful consultants alike, combined with my
116 own experience tell me that human resource consultants who follow these goals and
117 strategies consistently produce more effective outcomes in the client organizations. They

118 do so not because they have come in to “save the day,” but because they appreciate that
119 in the end, it is the client who must participate in and own the process and the outcome of
120 any change effort for it to ultimately be successful. The art of masterful consulting is to
121 engage with clients in a way that adds value through ones knowledge and facilitative
122 capability, while never telling the client what to do or how to do it. Consultants seduced
123 by their own or the client’s desire for “answers” feel heroic in the moment, yet rarely
124 produce lasting change.