

Working with Consultants:

## Look Before You Leap

*Needs assessment and careful selection are the keys to a successful consulting relationship.*

By Barbara Kaufman, PhD.

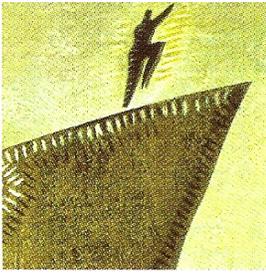
**M**ANY HIGHER EDUCATION institutions rely on external consultants not only for advice but also for help in diagnosing and developing strategies related to common and uncommon challenges in a whole host of areas – such as compensation, leadership development, enrollment, labor relations, strategic planning, technology, capital planning, and succession planning.

Ideally, a consultant brings a fresh perspective, best practices from other IHEs, problem-solving skills, and cost-effective ways of managing the college or university's resources. That description paints a rosy picture. But unless institutional leaders assess their needs clearly and choose consultants wisely, the experience can be an exercise in futility.

### IS A CONSULTANT REALLY NECESSARY?

A common mistake that leads to ineffective consulting relationships is bringing in outside expertise at the wrong time or for the wrong reasons. It's best not to hire a consultant under any of the following circumstances:

- *Prematurely, before a need has been framed and buy-in has been obtained from the relevant stakeholders.* Without



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buy-in, consultants will meet with resistance, and their work will be difficult, if not ineffective.

- **When there is a secondary, unspoken agenda, such as to obtain a whitewashed report to support pre-existing assumptions.**

For instance, consultants are sometimes hired under the pretense of coaching a leader when the real agenda is to hasten the leader's exit or to support an assumption about an organizational restructuring.

- **If it will jeopardize the client's credibility as a knowledge expert.** For example, when one university's head of HR hired a consultant who was a compensation specialist, the board questioned the need because the head of HR was hired on the basis of expert knowledge about executive compensation. If internal personnel are skilled in the consultant's discipline, it is wise to define the overlapping role boundaries between the consultant and the internal experts. For instance, a consultant may be hired only to research market pricing, while an internal expert evaluates the research, presents it to the board, and proposes a course of action.

- **When the organization is suffering from consultant burnout.** One institution's athletics department, for example, brought in a series of four consultants to work on enhancing its programs when the staff saw no need for consulting expertise. Consultant burnout is particularly common when there are frequent changes at the top, and each new leader hires outside experts without reviewing what previous leaders' consultants have already recommended. New recommendations are viewed with cynicism because internal stakeholders know that the previous consultant's recommendations were never used.

### GOOD REASONS FOR HIRING CONSULTANTS

On the other hand, there are situations when it's advantageous to enter into relationships with consultants. Outside expertise is desirable under the following circumstances:

- **When the university needs a core competency to address a short-term need.** Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, cites the following example from her tenure as president of the **University of North Carolina**: "When voters passed the largest bond initiative in the history of higher education for construction on our campuses, we hired a construction management consultant. It was a competency we only needed for the short term and might never need again. The consultant, who served as a troubleshooter, had a deep network of subcontractors for critical work and the technical expertise to monitor construction progress. He was also extraordinarily skilled at team-building with the university's facilities staff, providing mentoring and feedback in a non-threatening way."

- **When the consultant has content expertise around particular best practices.** Broad cites an example from a campus of **The California State University**, where a consultant was hired to re-engineer an antiquated procurement process in the early 1990s. "The consultant had the subject matter expertise," she says, "and was highly skilled at obtaining buy-in from the internal stakeholders who would have to implement the new

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system. She assigned the strongest internal opponents as team leaders to encourage them to own the process and to prevent stonewalling."

- **When there is a need for a neutral, objective party who is not living the university's culture every day and has no agenda.** One university hired a consultant to conduct a performance review of its president. The only internal candidate for the role would have been the head of HR, who worked with the president every day. For these types of assignments, a consultant needs real objectivity, says Jackie McClain, former vice chancellor of human resources for the Cal State system. "The consultant has to be able to convince everyone that he or she is open to finding the truth, rather than working toward a preconceived outcome." She cites the example of a consultant who was hired with a specific organizational restructuring in mind. "The

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entire staff knew that the administration wanted to split up a function into two departments,” she says. “The consultant had to build credibility and convince them that she was open to new ideas and would be able to present alternative solutions to the administration.”

• **To work with a senior executive who is isolated at the top.** The consultant’s role is that of a trusted advisor and sounding board and someone who can contribute peripheral vision to help the leader see beyond his or her blind spots.

In all of these situations, a consultant can bring best practices to the table based on the perspectives gained in working with other organizations and can advise leaders on alternative courses of action from the vantage point of a neutral outsider.

**‘Project scope creep’ can occur when various individuals begin adding to the consultant’s work order.**

## 10 STEPS FOR CONSULTANT SELECTION

If external expertise is needed and buy-in has been obtained from all stakeholders, the process of selecting the right consultant should be as rigorous as hiring a new leader. To ensure a successful consulting engagement, here’s an approach that works:

1. Examine the relevancy of the consultant’s experience, check references, and review prior work products. Hiring a consultant with the wrong or inadequate credentials may lead to failure.
2. Seek out professionals who understand the university culture and have a fit with the institution so they can create customized solutions to stated or unstated challenges. “Consultants need to understand the academy’s culture of inclusive processes,” says Broad. “You cannot simply drive to the finish line with only the top leadership on board the way you may be able to do in the private sector.” Universities sometimes hire big-name, corporate-sector consulting firms that have no experience in university environments. When this happens, recommendations may not fit with the institutional culture, especially as it relates to the need for inclusiveness.
3. Make sure the consultant’s style is aligned with the institution’s values and administrative leadership model. At the same time, the individual has to demonstrate style flexibility in order to work effectively with a variety of

players. “Consultants may be required to translate technical language for a lay board,” says Broad, “so they have to be attuned to the audience and be crisp, clear, and understandable.” She recalls an experience with a consultant who parachuted in, expecting to facilitate a retreat without taking the time to understand the culture or to customize the assessment tool. The consultant was too aggressive with board members and unwilling to alter her style.

4. Look for consultants who are self-confident without being intellectually arrogant. It takes a special skill to float ideas without appearing critical or overbearing.
  5. Identify candidates who are comfortable in a contributor role. A consultant’s role is to make the client look effective, so this person should not feel the need to be in the limelight or to receive credit for accomplishments.
  6. Select a consultant with a high degree of professionalism and the ability to earn trust. “Consultants have to be able to build a trusting relationship with the primary client and at the same time with others in the organization to gain acceptance of their role and their results,” says McClain, citing the following example: “A consultant was so focused on protecting the leader’s image that he lost sight of the best strategies to protect the institution.”
  7. Find a consultant whose background and expertise are appropriate to the assignment. A university board recently began working with a large consulting firm’s senior team. Its initial satisfaction with the engagement quickly waned when the firm sent in the junior team to complete the assignment. Although these young professionals were highly educated and skilled, they lacked the knowledge, insight, and depth of experience to work with university leadership.
  8. Look for a consultant who exhibits curiosity about the institution and the assignment and is truly a great listener.
  9. Make sure the consultant understands the organization’s culture, including its politics. “The ability to read the culture is crucial so the consultant can design a strategy based on cultural fit,” says McClain. “What appears to be a sound policy may not be workable for a particular institution because of a quirk in the culture.”
  10. Recognize that consultants should be change agents. “Because an external resource does not have a horse in the race, he or she can open minds within the campus community to the possibility of change,” says McCain.
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As unbiased, trusted advisers, consultants should not say yes to everything the client proposes. They need to be skilled at pushing back and delivering bad news. This may mean having to tell the client that his or her proposed strategy is flawed because the consultant has seen a similar course of action fail at another organization.

### MAKING CONSULTING ENGAGEMENTS WORK

In addition to the homework necessary to find a suitable consultant, internal research is required to make the engagement a success. First, understand the organization's culture and history relating to the use of consultants. An investigation into how consultants were used in the past may reveal that one or more already tackled very similar projects and their recommendations were never implemented. Was it because their work was not credible, or because they met with resistance or inertia? If a new engagement proves necessary despite prior efforts, the previous reports may be useful to the new consultant as a baseline.

A written contract that defines the project's scope, steps, deliverables, deadlines, and fees is indispensable. It should set clear role boundaries, identifying which executive will be the consultant's client and who else, if anyone, will have access to the consultant and his or her work. Identify which stakeholders need to be kept up-to-date as the project progresses and with whom the final report will be shared.

When role boundaries are not clearly set, a number of serious problems can arise. One is "project scope creep," which occurs when various individuals begin adding to the consultant's work order. Another is confusion over who the client is. For example, if a consultant's initial client is the president, but then a dean becomes the primary contact, roles may blur across lines of responsibility, or confidentiality may inadvertently be compromised. In addition, when roles are not clearly spelled out, sometimes consultants are perceived as wielding more influence with the president than the senior team members do. Anxiety, cynicism, and even

attempts at sabotaging the consultant's work often result from such confusion.

Broad recommends that a consulting contract contain clear stipulations concerning conflicts of interest. This is particularly important with search consultants. "Include a written prohibition against taking on a competitive assignment with a university in the same Carnegie classification without prior approval," she suggests. "Otherwise the consultant can fish from the same pond, have divided loyalties, and pick and choose which candidates to present to which client." When working with search consultants, it's also important to have the search committee chaired by a strong individual who can manage the politics and any board members who may attempt to lean on the consultant with a preferred candidate, Broad advises.

When dealing with large consulting firms, Broad recommends stipulating clearly which consultants will actually perform the work. "Sometimes team A makes the sale, but then team B parachutes in, which may lack the seasoned core competencies, background, and expertise to do an A job," she says.

As the consulting engagement gets under way, be open and honest about sacred cows and other "undiscussables." Make sure the consultant understands where the pockets of resistance might be. For example, if strategic planning proved futile in the past, some campus constituencies may resist further efforts in that direction. Keep the consultant up-to-date on organizational changes and political developments between meetings. In particular, this can occur when a consultant visits the organization infrequently but returns after an absence to find that a new crisis or new leadership has changed the university's direction.

### IT'S ABOUT CHANGE

These caveats and best practices form a strategic approach to the hiring of consultants. The approach begins with recognizing a clear need, problem, or opportunity; carefully selecting a consultant whose experience and style fit the institution and the issue; working proactively with the consultant to create change; and measuring success over time. Being methodical and strategic is far superior to the common hit-or-miss method of rushing into a consulting relationship. It will avoid painful experiences and optimize results.

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