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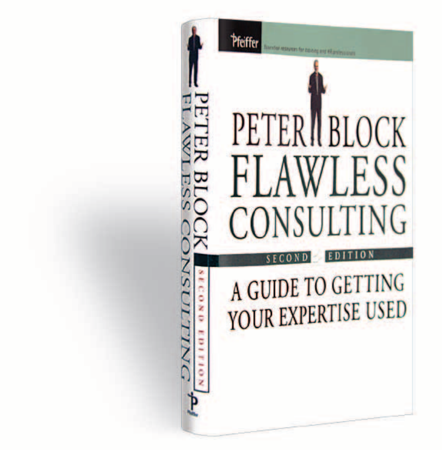
FILE: HANDS-ON MANAGEMENT



By Peter Block

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A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used

FLAWLESS CONSULTING

(SECOND EDITION)

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

For 15 years, internal and external consultants have relied on Peter Block's landmark best seller, Flawless Consulting, *to learn how to deal effectively with clients, peers and others. Using illustrative examples, case studies and exercises, Block — one of the most important experts in his field — offers his legendary warmth and insight.*

In this summary you will discover strategies for engagement, implementation and preparation for feedback. Block also explores whole-systems discovery, flawless consulting from diagnosis to discovery, and ethics and the shadow side of consulting.

This summary is for anyone who does consulting, even if you don't call yourself a consultant. It is about having leverage and impact when you don't have direct control. Leverage and impact mean that the consultant's expertise is used and his or her recommendations are accepted. This makes for job satisfaction for consultant and client alike. The path to having leverage and impact is called flawless execution. This summary is a guide to developing skills to navigate this path.

Consulting flawlessly requires intense concentration on two processes: being as authentic as you can be at all times with the client and attending directly, in words and actions, to the business of each stage of the consulting process. This summary describes what authentic consulting behavior looks like. It also describes the business side of each stage of the consulting process.

In addition, this summary will show you:

✓ ***How to prepare for a career in consulting.***
✓ ***Various ways of behaving with clients.***
✓ ***How to have an impact without control.***
✓ ***How to help your clients learn how to better function in their world.***
✓ ***How to manage yourself as you are consulting to maximize your potential usefulness and deal directly with the resistance you encounter.***

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FLAWLESS CONSULTING (SECOND EDITION)

By Peter Block

— THE *COMPLETE* SUMMARY

A Consultant by Any Other Name …

A consultant is a person in a position that has some influence over an individual, a group or an organization, but who has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. A manager is someone who has direct responsibility over the action. The moment you take direct responsibility, you are acting as a manager.

Most people in staff roles in organizations are really consultants, even if they don't officially call themselves consultants. People doing staff work for an organization where they work full time are called internal consultants (as opposed to external consultants).

Staff people function in any organization by planning, recommending, assisting or advising in such matters as personnel, financial analysis, systems analysis, market research, product design, organizational effectiveness, safety, human resource development and many others.

Clients and Line Managers

Recipients of a consultant's advice are called clients. A client can be an individual, a work group, a department or a whole organization. The client is the person or people whom the consultant wants to influence without exercising direct control.

In organizations, clients for the services provided by staff people are called line managers. Line managers have to labor under the advice of staff groups, whether they like it or not. But any staff function, by definition, has no direct authority over anything but its own time, its own internal staff and the nature of the service it offers.

The key to understanding the consultant role is to see the difference between a consultant and a manager. A consultant needs to function differently than a line manager. Much of the disfavor associated with the term consultant comes from the actions of people who call themselves consultants but act as surrogate line managers. When you act on behalf of or in the place of the manager, you are acting as a surrogate manager.

Consultation describes any action you take with a system of which you are not a part. A consultant's objective is to engage in successful actions that result in people or organizations managing themselves differently. ■

Techniques Are Not Enough

In acting as a consultant, you always operate at two levels. One level is the substance — the cognitive part of a discussion between yourself and the client. The substance level is the problem-solving, rational or explicit part of the discussion, where you are working on the technical/business problem. At the same time and at another level, both you and the client are generating and sensing your feelings about each other. The relationship of the consultant to the client during each phase is a second level of data that needs attention.

Feelings are the *affective* side of the discussion and an important source of data for the consultant — data about the client's real problems and what the possibilities are for establishing a good relationship. Once you value the affective side of the relationship as an important area of attention, the next step is to increase your comfort level in putting into words how you are feeling about the relationship as it's going on. Then you need to focus on growing more skillful in putting your data about the relationship into words so you don't overly increase defensiveness on the part of the client.

There are four elements of the affective side of consultant-client interaction that are always operating: responsibility, feelings, trust and your own needs.

The Consultant's Goals

Here is a set of preferred goals for each consulting job that contributes to effective consultant and manager performance:

- **To Establish a Collaborative Relationship.** A col-

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The author: Peter Block founded two well-known training firms, Designed Learning and Block Petrella Weisbord. Since the first edition of *Flawless Consulting* (1981), he has written two additional best-selling books, *The Empowered Manager* and *Stewardship*.

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Techniques Are Not Enough
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laborative relationship promises maximum use of people's resources — both the consultant's and the client's.

● **To Solve Problems So They Stay Solved.** It is possible to act in a way that only the immediate problem gets solved. An increase in the present effectiveness of the organization does not mean that the managers have learned anything about how to solve similar problems and thus become more competent.

Teaching the managers skills in solving the problem themselves next time requires that they understand that disturbing employee behavior is a symptom of more basic problems.

● **To Ensure Attention Is Given to Both the Technical/Business Problem and the Relationships.** Each situation has two elements: the technical/business problem and the way people are interacting around that problem.

In most organizations, primary attention is given to the technical/business problem. Consultants can urge attention to the process issues, and line managers will listen to them in a way in which they would not listen to each other.

Developing Client Commitment

The consultant needs to be very conscious of building internal commitment all during the consulting process. Effective consulting skills are those steps and behaviors that act to create internal commitment in managers.

Client commitment is the key to consultant leverage and impact. A consultant's impact is determined by the client's commitment to the consultant's suggestions. Building this commitment is often a process of removing obstacles that block the client from acting on the consultant's advice. ■

Flawless Consulting

It is possible to consult without error and to do so quite simply. The way to keep it simple is to focus on only two dimensions of consulting. Ask yourself these two questions whenever you are with a client:

1. Am I being authentic with this person now?

2. Am I completing the business of the consulting phase I am in?

Authentic behavior with a client means you put into words what you are experiencing with the client as you work. *This is the most powerful thing you can do to have the leverage you are looking for and to build client commitment.*

The client's primary question is: "Is this consultant someone I can trust?" Lower trust leads to lower leverage and lower client commitment. Authentic behavior leads to higher trust, higher leverage and higher client commitment. Authentic behavior is to literally put into words what you are experiencing.

Completing the Requirements of Each Phase of the Project

In addition to being authentic, flawless consulting demands a knowledge of the task requirements of each phase of the project. These requirements are the "business" of each phase and must be completed before moving on. Here are the requirements of each phase:

● **Contracting** — Negotiating wants, coping with mixed motivation, surfacing concerns about exposure and loss of control, and triangular and rectangular contracting.

● **Discovery and Data Collection** — Layers of analysis, political climate, resistance to sharing information and the interview as a joint learning event.

● **Feedback and the Decision to Act** — When consultants funnel data, present personal and organizational data, manage the feedback meeting, focus on the here and now and don't take it personally.

● **Engagement and Implementation** — When consultants bet on engagement over mandate and persuasion, design more participation than presentation, encourage difficult public exchanges, put real choice on the table, change the conversation to change the culture and pay attention to place.

It is possible to move through these phases and skip some of these requirements. Identify consultant wants and client offers as clearly as you assess client wants. Wants skipped in the beginning are much harder to recover in later phases. Another key task of contracting is to discuss the client's motivation to proceed with the project. ■

Staging the Client's Involvement

The stages leading up to implementation of a change — called the preliminary events — can be divided into the following 12 specific action steps:

1. Defining the initial problem
2. Deciding to proceed with the project
3. Selecting dimensions to be studied
4. Deciding who will be involved in the project
5. Selecting the method of data collection
6. Collecting data
7. Funneling the data
8. Summarizing the data
9. Analyzing the data
10. Providing feedback
11. Making workable recommendations
12. Deciding on actions

Contracting Overview

A contract is simply an explicit agreement of what the consultant and client expect from each other and how they are going to work together. It is usually verbal, sometimes in writing. Contracts with external consultants are more often in writing because external consultants are trusted less than internal consultants, especially when it comes to money.

Some internal consultants always like to have a written document describing the project they are working on. This is probably a good idea, even if it is in the form of a letter. But, essentially, a contract between an internal or external consultant and a line manager is a social contract. It is designed not so much for enforcement, but for clear communication about what is going to happen on a project.

Legal contracts contain these two basic elements that apply to consulting relationships:

● **Mutual Consent** — Both sides enter the agreement freely and by their own choosing. The concept of mutual consent directly addresses the issue of how motivated the staff person and the line manager are to engage in a project together.

● **Valid Consideration** — Consideration is the exchange of something of value between the consultant and the client. Valid consideration must be given by *both* parties for a solid contract to exist. Here are some tangible items that consultants need that should be a part of the original contract: operational partnership in the venture, access to people and information in the line organization, time of people in the line organization and the opportunity to be innovative.

Elements of a Contract

The following elements should be covered in most of your contracts, especially when the contract signals the beginning of a significant project:

● **The Boundaries of Your Analysis.** Begin with a statement of what problem you are going to focus on.

● **Objectives of the Project.** This identifies the organizational improvements you expect if your consultation is successful.

● **The Kind of Information You Seek.** Some of the information types you may want to specify in the contract include technical data, figures and work flow, attitudes of people toward the problem, and roles and responsibilities.

● **Your Role in the Project.** This is the place to state how you want to work with the client.

● **The Product You Will Deliver.** Be very specific about what you are offering. Will your feedback be an oral or written report? How long will it be and how much detail will the client receive? Is the report likely to be five pages or 50?

● **What Support and Involvement You Need From the Client.** This is where you specify what you want from the client to make this project successful. This list is what the client is offering you.

● **Time Schedule.** Include starting time, any intermediate mileposts and completion date.

● **Confidentiality.** Who gets what report is a constant concern.

● **Feedback to You Later.** An optional element to the contract is to ask the client to let you know the results of your work six months after you leave. ■

The Contracting Meeting

The personal interaction between the consultant and the client during the initial contracting meeting is an accurate predictor of how the project itself will proceed. Pay close attention to the process of those early meetings. The critical skill in contracting is being able to identify and discuss process issues between the consultant and the client as they occur.

Here is a series of steps that lead to either an agreement to work together or an agreement not to work together:

Step 1. Personal Acknowledgment. Make personal statements of your feelings about being in this meeting with the client today.

Step 2. Communicate Understanding of the Problem. Acknowledge the unique aspects of the situation. Restate, in your own words, your perception of the problem. Reassure the manager that there are solutions to this unique and complicated problem and that you can be of help.

Step 3. Client Wants and Offers. After saying hello and hearing an initial statement of what the line manager is concerned about, look the manager in the eye and say, “So …, what do you want from me?” The answer is the heart of the contracting process, and the question must be asked directly. After hearing what the client wants from you, ask what support the client can offer you on the project. You want to know what the budget is for this project. The other two offers the client can make to you are the time of his or her people and access to information.

Step 4. Consultant Wants and Offers. One of the most critical skills in flawless consultation is to put directly into words what you, the consultant, want from the client to make a project successful.

Step 5. Reaching Agreement. After exchanging wants with the client, either you reach agreement or you get stuck.

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The Contracting Meeting

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Step 6. Asking for Feedback About Control and Commitment. Most weak contracts are faulty for one of two reasons: The client entered the agreement under some kind of coercion, however subtle and indirect; or the client agreed to the project, but increasingly felt that he or she did not have adequate control over what was happening. Be compulsive about testing for the existence of each of these flaws.

Step 7. Give Support. Make supportive statements to the client about his or her willingness to begin this project with you. The support needs to be genuine and specific.

Step 8. Restate Actions. Make sure you and the client know what each of you is going to do next.

Getting Stuck

In Step 5 of the contract meeting, it was discussed what to do once an agreement is reached. However, what happens if an agreement is difficult? The following detail various ways of getting stuck, as well as solutions to apply to the issue:

- **Getting Stuck on Wants and Offers.** You are stuck when you hear yourself re-explaining something for the third time or when the client dives into the third explanation of the same idea.
- **Think/Recess.** Mentally pull back from the conversation. Are there different wants you can ask for and still meet your objectives?
- **New Wants and Offers.** Present any new ideas on what you want from the client or what you have to offer.
- **Stuck Again**. A different kind of discussion is needed to move forward.
- **Process How We Are Handling This Discussion.** Shift the focus of discussion to the process of the meeting. Say, "I think we are stuck."
- **Rediscuss Wants and Offers.** Go back to the specifics of the project.
- **If Still Stuck — Terminate/Minimize Your Investment.** Using your own style and own words, end the contracting process and cut your losses. ■

The Internal Consultant

As an internal consultant, you are at every moment embedded in some part of the hierarchy and the current politics of the organization. This means that internal consultants are often operating more by mandate than by choice. This makes internal contracting a higher-risk proposition. In the end, all the internal consultant can do is make explicit the costs of mandated change. Just because you do not have the final say is not a reason to avoid the argument.

Clarity of Understanding

The difference in intensity and setting for these issues makes the internal consultant's position more delicate and more vulnerable. This creates constraints on how internal consultants contract with clients and how much risk they feel willing to take in giving honest feedback. If the constraints lead to very cautious behavior in the long run, the internal consultant can come to be used as only a pair of hands. If they ignore constraints altogether, internal consultants may be seen as immature and disloyal.

The clarity of understanding and agreement with your boss greatly affects your ability to respond appropriately and flawlessly with your clients. If you are unclear about the contract with your boss, you will tend to get involved in soft contracts with clients.

Try this exercise: First, list the key wants you have of your boss. Then ask your boss to make a list of the key wants he or she has of you. Exchange your lists and meet to see whether you can agree on a contract that represents a reasonable balance. ■

Understanding Resistance

The key to understanding the nature of resistance is to realize that resistance is a reaction to an emotional process taking place within the client. Resistance is a predictable, natural, emotional reaction against the process of being helped and against the process of having to face up to difficult organizational problems.

Resistance is a necessary part of the learning process. For a client to learn something important about how to handle a difficult problem, the feelings of resistance need to be expressed directly before the client is ready to genuinely accept and use what the consultant has to offer. ■

Dealing With Resistance

There are specific steps a consultant can take to help a client get past the resistance and get on with solving the problem. The basic strategy is to help the resistance

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Resistance

There are three specific steps for handling resistance:

Step 1. Identify in your own mind what form the resistance is taking. The skill is to pick up the cues from the manager and then, in your head, put some words to what you see happening.

Step 2. State, in a neutral, nonpunishing way, the form the resistance is taking. The skill is to find neutral language.

Step 3. Be quiet. Let the line manager respond to your statement about resistance.

Dealing With Resistance
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blow itself out, like a storm, and not to fight the resistance head-on.

Feelings pass and change when they are expressed directly. The skill for the consultant is to ask clients to put directly into words what the client is experiencing — to be authentic. The most effective way to encourage the client to be authentic is for the consultant to also behave authentically. ■

From Diagnosis to Discovery

Human systems are complex and require more than mechanical, cause-and-effect solutions. When we accept the term *diagnosis* as a description of this phase of consulting work, we reinforce the belief that a prescriptive, engineering strategy can improve a living system. This rational stance undervalues the emotional and effective requirements of real improvements.

The stance you want to take is that the consultant can be a guide through a process of discovery, engagement and dialogue, in which clients will find an answer to their questions and launch an implementation that will be enduring and productive. Discovery, engagement and dialogue give consultants their best shot at building client capacity and solving problems so they stay solved.

Build Internal Commitment

The concern of the consultant is how to help the client be open to the discovery process. This means giving more attention to dealing with resistance. It also demands work on building the client's internal commitment to the process at each step of the way. The skill for the consultant is to address the organizational element of each problem as rationally as he or she addresses the technical part of each problem.

The purpose of discovery is to mobilize action on a problem: action that will improve the organization's functioning. Concentrate on four things:

1. Keep simplifying, narrowing and reducing your study so it focuses more on the client's next steps.

2. Use everyday language.

3. Give a great deal of attention to your relationship with the client.

4. Treat data on how the client organization is functioning as valid and relevant information. ■

Getting the Data

When you finally have a contract and you have entered the discovery phase, you are ready to collect some information and develop your own assessment of what is happening to create problems for the client. The business of this phase is:

1. Collecting information at three different layers of analysis, to understand both the presenting problem and the underlying problems.

2. Assessing the organizational and managerial climate in which your recommendations will be received.

3. Dealing with resistance of the client in sharing information with you.

4. Viewing the interviews you do as an active force in beginning to solve the problem: The act of interviewing itself changes an organization.

5. Reducing the data to a manageable number of issues.

6. Collecting and analyzing data accurately and objectively. ■

Whole-System Discovery

"Whole system" means that at least a large sample of those who will be acting on the recommendations are going to play a major part in creating them. It makes the change effort more self-managing than a third-party approach.

A whole-system approach also looks at the entire system, not its parts. It can involve a cross section of people that approximates a whole system more directly and earlier than a third-party approach.

The most traditional third-party process involves the lone consultant, who studies the situation and makes recommendations. There are other times when the people affected by the changes can join you in the process of discovery, recommendations, decision and implementation. This is the whole-system approach, whereby parties to the change work through the process on their own behalf.

Get Everyone in the Room

The essence of whole-system discovery is to get everyone in the room at the same time. This deepens an organization's sense of community and allows people to operate with a common database. The main advantage is that there is no need to sell a set of actions to anyone, especially to people at lower levels of the system. The power of the whole-system approach lies in the high engagement and involvement of the entire organization. ■

Preparing for Feedback

Trusting yourself to focus on what you feel is important may be the most valuable thing you have to offer the client. Treat the choice of what to examine as a very important choice and yours to influence.

When struggling to decide what is important in a pile of

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Preparing for Feedback
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notes, read through all the notes once, then put them away. On a blank sheet of paper, list what you think is important in the data — usually about four or five items. Let that be your guide on what to report and how to organize the report. What stands out to you is what you want to stand out to the client. Let the other information become part of the appendix, but don't clutter the feedback meeting with a complete list of everything you found out.

Emphasize items that the client has control over changing, are clearly important to the organization, and there is some commitment somewhere in the client organization to work on.

In giving any kind of feedback, you're doing two things: You're giving support to the organization and you're confronting it. Supporting and confronting can almost come in the same sentence. The support statement often is a simple acknowledgment that you hear what the client is saying. The confront statement then identifies the difference between how you see a situation and how the client sees the situation. ■

Managing the Feedback Meeting

To flawlessly manage a feedback meeting:

1. Funnel the Data. Select what data to report.

2. Present Personal and Organizational Data. How is the problem being managed?

3. Manage the Feedback Meeting. Maintain control of it and structure it. Focus on what will be done about the problem.

4. Focus on the Here and Now of the Meeting. Deal directly with the resistance as it occurs.

5. Don't Take It Personally. After 6 p.m., you can take anything personally, but during the day, no matter how many guns are aimed at you, your task is to stay focused on the client's internal struggle to confront reality that is being resisted.

The other half of flawless feedback is to behave authentically — to state to the client what you are experiencing as the feedback meeting progresses. ■

Implementation

Implementation is, in theory, the point of the consultation. There are two aspects of implementation for the consultant. One is the technical work using the expertise you have spent years developing.

If you are a financial analyst, you begin introducing a system of controls. If you are an engineer, you redesign the input valves for the furnace. If you are a training manager, you start the training program.

The second aspect of implementation is how to build support for the business or technical change you are planning. Implementation does not usually begin until the people who do the work decide whether they are going to make real changes or simply go through the motions. Real changes require real commitment, and part of your role is to help fire that spark.

In facing the time pressure and intensity of implementing a program, it is always quicker for you to do something yourself. Resist this temptation and stay with the process of 50/50 responsibility. If you take over the implementation, you are no longer consulting — you are acting as a surrogate manager. ■

Strategies for Engagement

A core strategy for building emotional commitment to implementation is to design new ways for people to engage each other. This may be more critical than the clarity or rightness of a decision. Results are achieved when members of a system collectively choose to move in a certain direction. Leadership behavior is not as vital as membership behavior.

When you are dealing with groups at the moment of implementation and action, the implementation phase centers on high-intensity participation, placing choice on the table, changing the conversation, transparency and the public expression of doubt, and co-creating structures to fit purpose.

The greatest service of the consultant may be to raise the consciousness of the client about the value of engagement in the implementation process. Implementation of any change boils down to whether people at several levels are going to take responsibility for the success of the change and the institution.

Successful engagement takes place when there are meetings that have:

- **Balance between presentation and participation**
- **Full disclosure and the public expression of doubt**
- **Real choice on the table**
- **New conversations**
- **A physical structure of the room that supports community.** ■

Tools for Engagement

Here are practical ways to structure a meeting:

Structure 1. Open with transparent purpose and level playing field. Keep it short and informal. Describe the concerns that began the process, define where the

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Tools for Engagement
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change effort is now, describe what the organization needs right now and give some idea of the structure.

Structure 2. Renegotiate expectations about participation. The passive contract between leader and participant needs to be shifted early and dramatically.

Structure 3. Rearrange the room. Freedom will create at first its own chaos and confusion, even irritation, and then its own order.

Structure 4. Create a platform for doubt. If doubt and even cynicism cannot be publicly expressed, then internal commitment cannot be offered freely.

Structure 5. Ask, "What do we want to create together?" Simply ask the question.

Structure 6. Create a new conversation. A change in action is preceded by a change in the conversation.

Structure 7. Choose commitment and accountability. There are two conditions of accountability that support high-commitment implementation strategies: We need to be accountable to our peers first and our boss second, and we need to commit without negotiation or barter.

Structure 8. Provide positive feedback. Bring closure to each meeting by acknowledging the effort and care brought into the room. Focus on the strengths and value each participant brought to the proceedings. ■

Ethics and the Shadow Side of Consulting

Being clear about the dark side of consulting has a practical as well as a moral side. When consultants get caught in their own self-interest or their need to assume a central or inflated role, the client feels it and withdraws. There are some steps that will, at a minimum, raise your consciousness about your contribution to the cynicism and doubt that infect the consulting industry.

- **Say No as Often as You Say Yes.** Consultants should make their own decisions on which projects to accept.
- **Stay True to Your Worth.** Stop measuring the success of your internal staff consulting work by the size of your staff, the volume of work you can generate or the approval rating of top management. Start measuring your work by the optimism and self-sufficiency you leave behind.
- **Grow on Your Own Terms.** Professional practice is the point, not the size of the practice. If there is more demand for your services than you can handle, give the business away.
- **Show How Everybody Counts.** The whole system is your client. All parts of it need to be supported, to learn and to be fully informed.
- **Leave It All Behind.** Commit yourself to the concepts of "home schooling" and building capacity. Your job is fundamentally to be an educator, not a problem solver. You may have to problem solve in the short run, but over time you need to develop ways for people to learn about your expertise.
- **Finally, Forgive.** In thinking about these conflicts and paradoxes, forgiveness is required. ■

The Heart of the Matter

Consulting is primarily a relationship business. No matter how research-based or technical the project, it will always reach a point at which the success of the work will hinge on the quality of the relationship the consultant has with the client. This relationship is the conduit through which the consultant's expertise passes.

The way consultants contact and engage people around their expertise is an applied art and takes hundreds of forms. At times it is one-to-one coaching with an individual or team. Or it can be working with a group on strategy or technology or running a training session.

The Final Question Is One of Faith

We do not have to induce change or guide it. All we have to do is join it. The consultant is as much a learner as any client. We are often more changed by our consultation than the client, and this is as it should be.

In the end, it is consultants' authenticity, the way they manage themselves and their connection to their clients, that is their methodology, their marketing strategy and the fruit of their labor. The fact that they show up with a briefcase, a resume and a conceptual framework is more a function of habit than necessity. It will be enough if they simply show up. And that is the heart of the matter. ■