

THE SECRETS OF CONSULTING



Gerald M. Weinberg

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by
Gerald M. Weinberg

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Preface

If you are a consultant, or if you ever use a consultant, this book is for you. That's a wide scope, because nowadays, nearly everyone is some kind of a consultant. There are hardware consultants and software consultants, social workers and psychiatrists, management consultants and worker consultants, energy consultants and information consultants, safety consultants and accident consultants, beauty consultants and septic tank consultants, consulting physicians and consulting attorneys, wedding consultants, decorators, genetic consultants, family therapists, economic consultants, bankruptcy consultants, retirement consultants, funeral consultants, and psychic consultants.

And those are only the professionals. You're using a consultant when you ask your neighbor what he uses to remove crabgrass from his lawn. You're being a consultant when your daughter asks you what college she ought to attend. In the United States, at least, you don't have to have a license to advise someone on what car to buy, or to help another find the quickest route to Arkadelphia.

With such diversity, what do all these consultants have in common? What would make them all want to read this book? My definition of consulting is *the art of influencing people at their request*. People want some sort of change—or fear some sort of change—so they seek consulting, in one form or another.

Many people influence other people without a request. A judge can sentence you to thirty years of hard labor. Your teacher can assign you thirty pages of hard reading. Your boss can give you thirty days of hard traveling. Your priest can apportion you thirty Hail Marys. Judges and teachers and bosses and priests can act as consultants. But they're not consultants in these cases, because these forms of influence are enforced by some authority system, not necessarily by the willing participation of the person influenced.

Other influencers have no authority, but are not consultants because they lack the request. Car dealers and other salespeople come to mind in this category. Again, they may act as consultants, but they're not consultants when they're trying to sell you something you didn't ask for.

Being called a consultant doesn't make you a consultant, either. Many people are called consultants as a way of glorifying their dull jobs. Some "software consultants," for instance, are retained strictly as supplementary programming labor. The last thing their "clients" want is to be influenced. All they want is grunt work turning out computer code, but by calling their temporary workers "consultants," they can get them for a few dollars less than if they called them something more mundane.

Conversely, you may be a consultant even if you don't have the label. Anyone with a staff job is acting as a consultant to the line management. When they hired you, they were requesting your influence (why else would someone hire a staff person?). After you've been on the payroll for a while, however, they may forget that you were hired to help. Sometimes, even you forget, so your task is a bit different from that of the outsider called in to work on a specific problem.

This is not a book about how to become a consultant. That part is easy. Most likely, you already are a consultant, because you become a consultant whenever you accept someone's request for influence. It's after you accept the request that you start needing help. When I became a full-time consultant, I soon discovered that few people request influence when their world is behaving rationally. As a result, consultants tend to see more than their fair share of irrationality. You may have noticed, for instance, how frequently someone who asks you for advice will then attack you angrily because of the requested advice. Such irrationality drives consultants crazy, but if they can cope with it, it can also drive them rich.

There were times, though, when I couldn't cope with it, so I turned to writing books to restore my sanity. Anyone who is irrational enough to buy one of my books may be requesting influence, but at least I don't have to give the advice face-to-face. That's why my books are cheaper than my consulting fees.

Most of the time, though, I enjoyed the direct interaction with my clients, if I could stand the irrationality. If I wanted to stay in the business, it seemed to me I had two choices:

1. Remain rational, and go crazy.
2. Become irrational, and be called crazy.

For many years, I oscillated between these poles of misery, until I hit upon a third approach:

3. Become rational about irrationality.

Foreword

Reading *The Secrets of Consulting* is a very special experience. The book appeals to my sense of humor, my awareness of human foibles, and my knowledge of how human systems work. Most especially, this book enlarges my view of how change takes place, of how a consultant in any context can become more effective.

It is profound in its meaning and humorous and colorful in its presentation. Jerry Weinberg's style is such that he shares his experiences and knowledge with me; I feel inspired, rather than defensive. As I read, I can identify with the people and the problems he describes, and I take pleasure in laughing at myself and in learning from the situations that apply to me.

The *Secrets of Consulting* is far more than a consultant's handbook. It is actually a book about how people can take charge of their own growth. As a family therapist, I've found it helpful to understand people's behavior and the relationship between consultant and client by relating it to our birth into this world, an appearance into an unequal triad: father, mother, child. The father and mother are supposedly grown, and the child is totally dependent on the adults. What we learn from birth to adulthood is related essentially to this; although much of what we learn is unconscious, it gives us both our feelings about ourselves and about our importance to the world. It also gives us skills for coping, which can be augmented by consultants.

Unconscious or not, our basic childhood learnings still operate, whether we're in the role of client or consultant. Jerry Weinberg often gently teases the reader, as well as himself, about some of these powerful unconscious lessons that get in the way of our hoped-for results.

For example, every one of us needs approval and open recognition of success: "Look, Ma, no hands," says the proud son while riding his bicycle, hoping Mama will smile. When Mama doesn't, the child's need is unfulfilled and, as an adult, he may still look for that smile, but in the wrong context.

Further, many of us still dance between the wish and need to know and the fear of rejection that might come from revealing our needs. "After all," we think to ourselves, "if I am smart, I should know everything already and

be able to handle every situation well. If I don't, it is a sign of my weakness, stupidity, perverseness, or incompetence.

Acknowledging such flaws would be intolerable." When this interpretation is made, most of us play games, either hiding our true feelings or projecting them onto someone else: thinking, for example, "I don't need you. And if it looks as if I do, it is probably because you are at fault."

Giving help, offering new ways to cope, is the consultant's job; but in order for the consultant to succeed, the job needs to be framed and approached with just that dance in mind. By asking for the consultant's help, the client is saying, sometimes nonverbally, "I need you. I can't say so directly, so find a way to help me without destroying my sense of worth." The wise consultant answers in a way that recognizes the client's self-worth, but also doesn't compromise his own. Otherwise, no real or lasting change can take place.

As the wise consultant, Jerry Weinberg illustrates this key point in many different contexts. He points to effective and interesting ways to approach the dance, and always praises the client who knows when and whom to ask for help as a mark of greater intelligence than as an admission of incompetence. In this context, both client and consultant grow in learning and strength, and everyone feels good.

After all, aren't the secrets of consulting basically what growth, competence, and good human relations are about? Namely, that we feel good about ourselves and about others, and that we experience our hopes and goals being fulfilled.

October 1985

Palo Alto, California

Virginia Satir

Chapter 1. Why Consulting Is So Tough

Have you ever dreamed of owning a restaurant? of concocting delicious meals for appreciative customers and ending each evening by counting the thousands of dollars piled up in the cash register? Recently, I found a book on starting your own restaurant. I was dying to read all about the glamour, the independence, and the riches, but the author wasted the entire first chapter trying to talk me out of my dream. "Put down this book," he urged, "and find yourself a sensible trade."

But I was not so easily dissuaded, not after a lifetime of dreams. I went on to the other chapters, only to find them full of questions to warn me about the ugly realities of the restaurant world: How will you fight off creditors, extortionists, and all your friends who want free meals? How do you deal with an invasion of cockroaches the day before the health inspector arrives? with disgustingly spoiled food when the refrigerator breaks down? with waiters who quit in the middle of your busiest night? What do you do when customers simply don't come through the door? What do you do when they do come? get loudly drunk? vomit all over the floor?

Eventually, he convinced me. Sadder but wiser, I put aside my restaurant fantasies and returned to the mundane task of being a consultant.

Have *you* ever dreamed of becoming a consultant? traveling on an expense account to glamorous places? giving brilliant advice to eager clients who follow it immediately and without question? raking in enormous fees with a minimum of work?

For those of us who would escape our miserable lot in life, consultant fantasies run a close second to restaurant fantasies. So before we get too far into the other secrets of consulting, we'd better face The Number One Secret:

Consulting ain't as easy as it looks.

In this chapter, we'll see some of the reasons why.

SHERBIE'S LAWS OF CONSULTING

It's difficult for an executive to criticize a budget when most line items are for mysterious high technology activities. It's easier to tackle the more understandable portions, like postage, janitorial services, and consulting.

Executives may not understand microprogramming or microeconomics, but they understand consulting. I've never met an executive who didn't have

a favorite—unflattering—joke about consultants. But, then, I've never met a consultant who didn't have a worse joke about executives.

In any high technology area of business, consultants' fees will be a substantial budget item, but the antagonism between managers and consultants often wastes most of this money. The manager who understands this antagonism will get more value out of the consulting budget. That's why I often speak to management and consultant groups about their relationship.

Even so, I rarely speak to both managers and consultants in the same audience; the first time I did, I almost created a riot. The audience had just finished a rather large steak preceded by a rather long cocktail hour, so before starting the serious part of my speech, I told a joke to get their attention:

On the first day of spring, Zeke and Luke decided to go bear hunting. It was too late to hunt when they reached their cabin, so they spent the first evening reducing their beer inventory. Just before dawn, Luke awoke and went out into the woods to answer the call of nature. Unfortunately, on his way back, he crossed the path of a huge grizzly bear out looking for breakfast. The bear started for Luke, and Luke started for the cabin. Just as the bear was about to grab Luke by the neck, Luke tripped and fell flat on his face. The bear, which was going too fast to stop, ran right past Luke and through the open cabin door. Thinking quickly, Luke jumped up, slammed and latched the door, and called into his sleeping partner, "You skin that one, Zeke, while I go fetch another."

The joke was well received, but some well-oiled manager called out, "That's just like a consultant. They always bring up grizzly problems and then leave us managers to solve them."

At that, an angry consultant jumped to his feet and said, "You've got it backwards. *Luke* was the manager. Managers handle all the easy problems themselves, but when they get something they can't handle, they lock it in the cabin with the consultant."

From there, I lost control of the audience, and nobody even noticed when I left the podium and fetched a second dessert. As I spooned in the melted rainbow sherbet, I tried to think of some way to stop the argument and help managers and consultants to understand each other.