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Psychology of Consulting

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EDITOR'S NOTE: CPAs, management consultants, engineers, economists, psychologists and the others who serve as advisers to management work at many different levels of sophistication. Most of them are expert in one or more specialties, but none can be familiar with all of the areas of knowledge, techniques and research which can contribute to the arts and sciences of effective management.

Under the identifying phrase "An Orientation Article," we therefore plan to publish as frequently as they are available articles intended to provide some orientation in specialized fields for those who feel a need for some familiarity with the terminology and possible applications of expertises other than their own.

The articles in this series are *not* intended for those already familiar with these subjects; aspects of the same subjects will be treated from time to time in more sophisticated fashion in our regular articles. We hope, however, that—skipping subjects in which they are already knowledgeable—readers will find these basic articles useful in broadening their general knowledge of the extraordinarily fast-growing science of management.

An Orientation Article—

A management services specialist may know all the techniques and theories of his profession, but he will still be ineffective if he doesn't understand the . . .

PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSULTING

by Theodore Andreychuk
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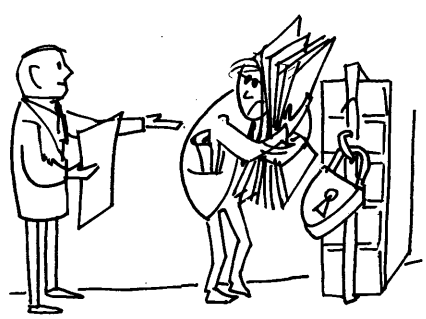
THIS article is concerned with behavior in the consulting relationship. This includes both the behavior of the consultant and that of the client. It is quite obvious that the consultant must be technically competent in his special field. The more experienced consultant, however, is quick to recognize that technical competence is only a part of the measure of his success. Equally important, and perhaps even more so, is his skill in communicating his ideas to others and his effectiveness as a total person.

If we examine our problem situations, we find that they usually center around the people and the personalities involved in them. If we look closely enough we discover that somewhere along the line we have failed to properly account for the human needs in the situation. There is a tendency to assume that people should respond to a logical, rational approach in viewing their problems. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The emotional needs of people frequently interfere with the acceptance of what may be a perfectly valid and logical solution. People frequently have an ingrained resistance to change per se, simply because they are not sure how this will affect their jobs, their status, their comfort, or their security. Each time we propose change, these feelings have to be taken into account.

A number of factors immediately contribute to the development of stresses in consulting. The nature of the situation itself contributes to some of these. The fact that a consultant has been called in may be interpreted by various people in the client organization as a reflection on their own skills and adequacy. Management is saying, in effect, that something is wrong, that there are problems present which it is incapable of solving. This implied criticism of certain staff members of an organization may immediately place them on the defensive in an effort to justify their past performance. The person who is most threatened may often be the one individual with whom the consultant will have to work very closely. It is interesting that the greater the skill of the consultant, the more effective he is in proposing a solution to the problem, the more he may aggravate the feelings of insecurity in the department head or specialist with whom he is working.



Another factor contributing to stress, oddly enough, is the fact that the consultant is an expert in a specialized field. The client may begin to feel that the consultant's viewpoint is too narrow, too limited and that he does not see or appreciate the needs of the company as a whole. He may feel also that the consultant thinks too much in terms of a particular group of problems rather than understanding the client's own particular problem. That is, that the approach is too theoretical, rather than practical for his purposes. The consultant must then convince the client that his expert-

ness resides in the very fact that he can draw from a variety of specific situations which he has experienced and from which he deduces his general principles.

If being an expert poses problems for the general consultant one should try being a consulting psychologist for a change. Everyone is an expert in this field, and everyone has his own brand of psychology which he applies. To attempt to convince a manager that fear psychology is not the most productive way of motivating people can be a very frustrating experience indeed. As a matter of fact, to tackle such a problem directly may very well result in the fear psychology being applied to the psychologist himself.

Another stress factor results from the fact that the consultant is an outsider. His presence in the situation threatens to upset the balance of interrelationships which have developed within the organization. Unless his status is rather clearly defined, there will be many questions raised as to his precise role in the situation. How much authority does he have? What does he communicate to top management about specific individuals? How much support does he have from top management? To what extent does his advice have to be accepted? How much is he involved in policy decisions? Unless these questions are answered and his role clarified, there will be considerable uneasiness on the part of the staff members. This, in turn, may be reflected in undue defensiveness, unco-operativeness, or reticence in discussions.

Stress may also be produced in the consulting situation when there are differing expectations as to just what the consultant's role is supposed to be. In setting up a data processing system, for example, the consultant may very well be thought of as an "expert" and function in this role. In this case then, he may set up a complete system in a fairly cut-and-dried fashion. In other problem areas, however, he may be considered as a "resource person." In this role his job may be simply to make suggestions as to alternative solutions to a problem, with the people involved making their own decisions as to what they want to do. A third role may be that of functioning as a "catalyst." In this capacity he may be present primarily to stimulate thinking and interaction in a group setting. Unless there is reasonably good agreement between client and consultant as to what his role should be, we have a potential for misunderstanding and a less than satisfactory relationship.

A final stress-producing factor resides within the consultant himself. His self-concept, his methods of dealing with his anxieties, his need to exercise authority, the way he responds to authority, are all factors which can influence his consulting relationships in either a positive or negative direction. These points will not be expanded upon specifically at this time, but will be referred to in the subsequent discussion.

Symptoms vs. basic problems

It is important to focus upon some of the factors involved in structuring the client relationship. When a consultant is invited into an organization, usually there is a present problem which concerns management, so that a solution is looked for which will correct the situation. If the problem is immediately accepted at face value, some real difficulties may be created for the consultant. This may happen when the problem as stated is only a symptom of some more basic disturbance which may not be immediately apparent.

This confusion of symptoms with basic problems is made very clear to psychologists who are engaged in counseling. A client comes in asking to see a counselor for help because he is making poor grades, because he cannot organize his study time effectively, or for one of any number of reasons. The immediate tendency in that initial period is for the neophyte to grasp the stated problem and attempt to deal with it directly. One soon discovers that in many cases the stated problem is only a symptom of an underlying and broader personality disturbance.

The analogy is not perfect, but experience has shown that a somewhat parallel situation exists in discussing problems with clients. The implication of this is clear. The consultant must approach each situation with an open mind. He must be alert to all cues, and draw the client out to get as complete a picture of the total situation as possible. By "total situation" is meant the total company picture and not just that of a specific department. It is necessary to develop some knowledge about the president and his philosophy of management, the other key people in the organization, and the relationships which exist between departments.

It is important then, in the early stages of a consulting engagement, to gain as much information as possible. It is only in this way that we can truly determine whether the problem as presented is basic or only a symptom. It is conceivable that such a discussion may lead us to conclude that we cannot be of real assistance to the client, that additional resources might have to be called in, or that certain preparatory steps might be required before our own contribution could be utilized.

It is wise to recognize also some of the hidden client needs in calling in a consultant. The client may be doing this simply to justify a solution which he has already arrived at. He may be looking for an excuse or an out in the event a program backfires. In such cases, where a client is emotionally involved in a solution to which he is privately committed, the potential danger is present that the consultant will

come up with a contrary solution, and a source of dispute arises. Unless the consultant is tuned in to this sort of thing, he may be drawn into endless and fruitless arguments.

I would like to cite an example of this from my own practice. It occasionally happens that a president calls us in when there is an impending shake-up in his top-management group. As a preliminary step he may ask us to evaluate all of his key people. We could accept this at face value and go ahead as he proposes. A little further investigation, however, might quickly reveal that he has already made up his mind about certain of the individuals whom he plans to let go. If we went ahead as he originally suggested, we would very probably be labeled as hatchet men in the situation and our opportunity for constructive counseling in the future would be seriously handicapped. Consequently, we recommend that he make the moves he is already privately committed to before we come into the picture. We shy away from being used as crutches or as excuses to permit a manager to escape from a responsibility which is obviously distasteful to him.

Read between the lines

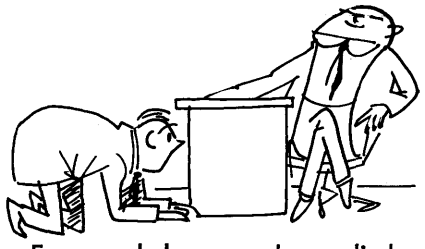
In order to get at some of the motives which are not explicitly stated by the client, a high degree of listening skill is required. This is a skill which requires relatively mature self-confidence, but it is also one which can be developed. A noted psychiatrist once wrote a book called, *Listening With the Third Ear*. The point he was driving at was that one should be aware of more than the actual words which are spoken. The expert listener must also be alert to implied attitudes and be aware of his own intuitive promptings in the situation. Not infrequently anxieties may limit perceptions and keep one from getting a true picture of the problem. The consultant may be so preoccupied in making the sale that he does not really pay attention to what is happening. The new consultant, in particular, may be so compelled to demonstrate his effectiveness and competency that he is already solving the problem before he has fully comprehended it.

So, learn to listen! Try to read between the lines, to be aware of the attitudes and feelings which underlie the words being spoken. Is the speaker anxious, insecure, discouraged, or simply using you as a sounding board? Does he need reassurance, or is this a good time for constructive criticism? The attitude of the listener should be one of attentiveness to the undercurrents in the situation. If one has ever talked to a man who was bored or inattentive for any reason, the chances are that he became less effective, somewhat disorganized in what he was trying to say, or felt angry or disgruntled about it. This is how the listener, by his attitudes, can directly affect what someone is trying to communicate to him.

Listening is only part of the total process of perceiving. Everyone tends to see and hear what goes on around him in a selective fashion. This is a function of the individual personality. Of course, selective perception is necessary for one to operate efficiently. There are so many stimuli impinging on the senses at all times that it would be very distracting to pay attention to all of them. For self-preservation, we have to shut out many things from conscious attention. The danger is that we may not take in enough information.

It is interesting how much information one can pick up by just walking through an office or plant. Are the people working industriously or just dawdling? Is everything orderly or in a state of confusion? Is the climate formal or informal? Simple observation of these and other factors can tell the consultant a great deal about an organization which may be helpful in his doing an effective job.

Perceptions are frequently governed by what happens to be salient in one's own thinking. An individual is always screening the various stimuli impinging on his senses in terms of what is important to him. The good consultant, on the other hand, listens for what is important to his client. This immediately registers loud and clear because what is important to the client must become important to the consultant.



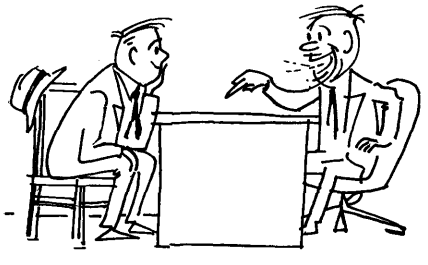
Fear psychology may be applied to the psychologist . . .

The way we tend to perceive people in structuring a consulting relationship is very important. These perceptions are often reflected in our general attitudes and can sometimes create problems which could have been avoided. For example, does the consultant have such a respect for authority that he tends to be overly deferential when talking with top-management people? Conversely, does he adopt a superior attitude to someone down the line in a way which belittles him? Does he have preconceived notions about people which lead him to stereotype others prematurely and thus lessen his effectiveness with them? Almost everyone in an organization has positive strengths which can be useful if tapped. The alert consultant is impressed by the wisdom of people who may occupy rather lowly positions. They may not be able to express themselves skillfully, but their meaning and intent is clear if one looks for it.

The way we perceive people has a definite effect on our relationships with them. It is true that the client is usually interested in solving some technical problem when a consultant is called in. Social gratification in this relationship is certainly not a verbalized expectation. Nevertheless, actual experiences have demonstrated that consulting does involve the issue of social gratification. Thus, a client may evaluate a consultant's performance not only in terms of his technical help, but also in terms of the personal relationship between them. The latter may even become the crucial factor in the suc-

cess or failure of the engagement.

The consultant's feelings toward people should be such that he can deal with them as equals, regardless of their status. Simply observing the proper social amenities is helpful. Calling a person by name, greeting him warmly, and showing a real interest in him and his problems go a long way in producing social satisfactions, if this behavior is sincere and not superficial. There is nothing more irritating than a person who applies what might be called social gimmicks with no real interest to support these. A genuine expression of cordiality is also interpreted as a sign of helpfulness and sets the stage for a productive relationship.



A trap the consultant may fall into all too easily is to identify too closely with the underdog . . .

One important additional factor is the matter of how we communicate our ideas to the client. It is obviously important to communicate clearly, concisely, and in easily understandable terms. The consultant who is afflicted with "expertitis" and who must resort to complicated or technical language may be satisfying his own ego needs more than the client needs. One must be sure not to take too much for granted initially, but proceed at a pace which is comfortable for the client.

The beginning consultant, in particular, may be inclined to move too fast in the initial stages. He knows that he has to make a contribution to be of value to the client. As a consequence, his anxiety may force him to rush in prematurely with suggestions or information. He is in fact satisfying his own need to make an impression rather than truly considering the client's needs.

Individual personality frequently enters into communication. The consultant may be arbitrary or demanding. He may be overly brusque or even hostile in his defensiveness. He may resort to sarcasm or subtle forms of needling. On the other hand, he may be patient, tolerant, and able to take plenty of time to explain things. His desire to be liked may also lead him to avoid unpleasant facts. The desirable goal is to be objective in communication, but with a sensitivity for the human needs in the situation.

To summarize, some of the points which have been made in regard to structuring a consulting relationship are as follows:

1. Be sure the problem is understood. Do not confuse symptoms with basic problems. Learn as much about the organization initially as possible.
2. Be aware of hidden client needs.
3. Develop good listening skills. Try to read between the lines. Listen with the third ear.
4. Sharpen up your over-all perceptions. Be alert to minimal cues.
5. Develop an understanding of your own attitudes toward people and how these affect your behavior.
6. Learn how to communicate effectively.

Once the engagement has moved beyond the initial structuring stage it is necessary to consider the ongoing relationship. As the program unfolds, it is important to keep in close touch with the key people in the organization. By key people, it is meant those whose policy-making roles will have a direct impact on what the consultant is trying to accomplish. These may include the president, the controller, or other top-level managers. Specifically who these will be will depend on the size of the organization, the organizational structure, and the scope of your program. The general principle is that one must keep his sights focused upward. Thinking should be top management oriented as much as possible.

This may sound axiomatic, but there are a number of reasons why this may be avoided. The president of an organization is obviously a busy man. We may feel that we are unnecessarily infringing on his time, and indeed we should avoid doing this. When we do make an appointment to see him, we should give advance thought to what we are going to discuss. Usually, however, the president is vitally interested in what is going on and likes to keep informed of the progress to date.

The consultant may avoid contacts with the top man because of the kind of person he is. If he is overly aggressive, or domineering, or inclined to be hypercritical, it is much more comfortable to avoid him. One's personal anxieties also come into play here. For example, some individuals may be awed by the authority and status of the president. Self-insight becomes important to permit the consultant to understand his feelings and to handle them more objectively.

A trap that the consultant may fall into, is to identify too closely with the underdog. This is particularly true when the top man is indeed the focal point of an existing problem. Permitting personal feelings to distort one's objectivity in such a situation can be fatal. Very often a person down the line in management is congenial and comfortable to be with. It is easy to spend time with such a person and subsequently neglect the necessary contacts with people who should really be cultivated and educated because of their policy making roles. When one finds himself avoiding a key

Every successful engagement includes three basic steps . . .

man like poison, then it is the time to stop and take a close look at one's own motivations. It is very helpful in such situations to use associates as sounding boards, and perhaps even to get a therapeutic catharsis from a discussion of one's anxieties about the man who is being avoided.

As the program moves along, the consultant must keep in mind the fact that he functions as an educator as well as an expert. Inbuilt resistances have to be overcome by a process of coaching, counseling, and training. As was mentioned earlier, people do not always respond logically. Change can be threatening, and attention should be given to the feelings aroused and how best to cope with them. This may require considerable discussion, and a patient, understanding attitude on the part of the consultant.

Seize every opportunity

A consultant should always be ready and alert to take advantage of unusual opportunities which may arise. These may relate to a better solution to the problem which is under examination. They may also lead to opportunities for providing additional or expanded services to the client. The consultant, in talking with various client staff members, will often hear about problems outside of his own specialty. If he is alert to such cues, he may be able to provide additional work for another member of his organization. In some cases, where his own organization cannot be of help, he may provide valuable assistance to his client by referring him to other consulting organizations.

This attitude of perceptive alertness is well described by the word, serendipity. The dictionary describes serendipity as the "gift of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for." However, such things do not happen accidentally, for the most part. The readiness for such action comes only as a consequence of preparation, study, thought, and the continual expansion of one's horizons. The creative scientist, for example, does not pull his ideas out of a void. He may have gone through years of preparation and experience before his brain child is finally born. Similarly, I think that it is important for everyone to stretch his mind and broaden his thinking so that when the unusual or unexpected opportunity does come along, he can recognize it and take advantage of it.

It may be well to consider now just what it is that constitutes the successful engagement. A consulting engagement is comprised of three basic steps. These are (1) the diagnosis of the problem, (2) the proposal for its solution, and (3) the implementation of the program.

The first two of these appear to be the easiest as far as most consultants are concerned. It is at the implementation stage that most failures occur. Almost any company has voluminous reports or proposals in its files, made by some consultant, simply gathering dust. For some reason or other, despite the considerable expenditure of time, money, and effort in preparing the report, nothing was done with it.

In other instances, attempts have been made to implement a recommended program, but often with unsatisfactory or even harmful results. It is not unusual to find companies where aborted consulting relationships have produced considerable resentment and bitterness.

Why should this be so? In most instances where this has occurred it is quite apparent that the reason is due primarily to the neglect of the human element in the situation. The consultant may have overlooked the fact that many times a solution to a problem introduces a stress factor into the organization. It may require special skills, a change in attitudes, a need for a broadened perspective, a rearrangement of jobs, generally increased competency, or any number of such things. The organization must be prepared for these changes so that individual anxieties may be dealt with constructively.

If the key management people are of sufficient stature and have the flexibility to change and adapt themselves to the new requirements, well and good. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The consultant may not have the necessary skills to evaluate these factors properly, and thus makes his recommendation in a partial vacuum. As a consequence, while his plan is basically sound and valid, it may backfire on him. Where the human factors are uncertain, it may be advisable for the consultant to recommend to management that a trained management psychologist be brought in to evaluate the people involved in the light of what will be required of them. The best plan in the world cannot possibly succeed if the key people are inadequate to meet the accompanying stresses.

Characteristics of success

The consulting firm should be interested in what could be thought of as some of the characteristics of the successful consultant. These can be considered under five areas of total functioning of the individual. These are:

1. Intellectual efficiency
2. Emotional stability and maturity
3. Interpersonal relations skills
4. Insight into oneself and others
5. Work philosophy and organization

Intellectual Efficiency. A high degree of native capacity is desirable, but this is not enough by itself.

It is important to utilize this capacity effectively by developing a broad fund of general knowledge in addition to the more restricted fund of technical knowledge. Industrious application must be coupled with a superior level of intellectual functioning. The motivation must be there to continually broaden and expand one's horizons.

The consultant must be able to think quickly. He should possess mental flexibility. The unduly ponderous, reflective thinker may get left behind. The able consultant thinks well on his feet and paces his thinking to meet the demands of the situation. He is accurate, yet does not get lost in a maze of insignificant details.

The successful consultant can analyze in depth and breadth. While succinctness can be a virtue, it may also lead to hasty formulations which are inadequate. Breadth of analysis requires a breadth of interest. Too narrow a specialization can clearly limit the consultant's total effectiveness. On the other hand, he can become so much of an undisciplined generalist that he may lose the focus of the specific problem.

There should be a balance between logical analysis and intuition. Analytical skills are important. At the same time, a leavening of intuition is needed where people are involved.

A balance of abstract and concrete thinking is required. The ability to abstract and utilize the common elements in diverse situations is a great aid in the consultant's work. However, while theory is important and useful, in the final analysis it must be translated and applied to the solution of a practical problem.

The consulting activity requires a balance between thought and action. The individual who is overly action-oriented may do violence to the complexity of problems often encountered in an organization. The consultant should be challenged by problems but not to the point where solutions become so paramount that they result in inflexible behavior and insufficient analysis.

A premium is placed on the consultant's capacity for original, creative thinking. He should be able to tolerate a lack of structure and be comfortable in nonroutine activities. At the same time, he should be able to push for clarity in a disciplined fashion. A progressive orientation is called for rather than mere emotional radicalism.

Being able to think independently is an asset. However, the consultant must also be able to take into account and utilize the contributions which others can make. This calls for an open-minded approach, but in the final analysis, personal judgment based on a mature utilization of outside information becomes the hallmark of the individual thinker.

Taking into account all of the foregoing, the consultant must still be able to effectively communicate his ideas to the client. Clarity and fluency are both important factors. The key to good communication is simplicity. Unnecessary verbiage tends to obscure rather than clarify. The overly facile talker also may be a poor listener and shut himself off from channels of communication.

Emotional Stability and Maturity. The key word here is balance. The consultant should be sensitive so he can respond to client needs, yet not be overly sensitive so that his feelings are easily bruised. Consulting is a stressful way of life. The consultant frequently encounters resistance, hostility, and outright rejection. He must be able to deal with these behaviors in a constructive fashion, rather than take them as personal affronts.

An effective consultant maintains

Consultant must be able to fly by the seat of his pants when necessary . . .

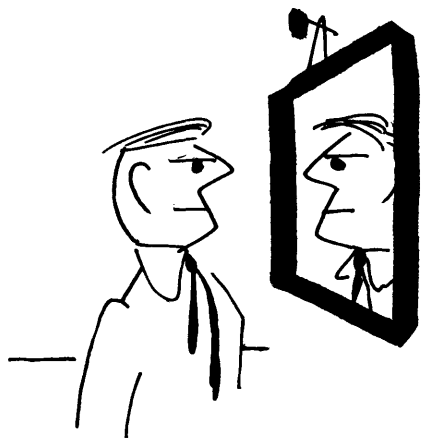
control over his feelings. The client situation is not the place to blow off steam. There is no place in consulting for the "prima donna."

Consulting is obviously stressful and frequently anxiety-producing. It requires a mature self-confidence and the ability to put one's anxieties to work for constructive solutions to problems. Lack of confidence or overconfidence are equally detrimental to a client relationship. There are other stresses indigenous in consulting such as travel, being away from the family, and coping with sudden emergencies; it requires a mature, well-balanced individual to cope with these.

The kind of person who needs considerable support and reassurance from his associates would probably not do well in consulting In some ways this is a lonely life. The consultant is never really a part of his client group and he has to operate far from home base much of the time. This requires a man who is reasonably self-sufficient, with enough confidence in his judgment and his capabilities so that he can feel his way along to a good solution even when the problem is initially obscure.

The consultant must be a person with high ethical standards. He is in a position where he can influence the lives of others in very significant ways. He must accept this responsibility with the highest level of professional conduct. Opportunistic ventures or the manipulation of people will, in the long run, only hurt the consultant and his organization.

Interpersonal Relations Skills. A number of factors related to this area have already been mentioned and need not be belabored. One point about appearance may be appropriate. The kind of impression that is made by one's dress and grooming is important. The consultant is a professional person and the client wants to regard him in this light. A basically conservative way of dressing and using good taste in the use of matching colors will create a universally good impression. Beyond this, the consultant should use his good judgment as to what is or is not acceptable in any given client situation.



Insight into Oneself and Others. As mentioned earlier, the ability to understand other people and their needs is of considerable importance in consulting. Prerequisite to this is the ability to understand oneself. The consultant must be constantly aware of how his behavior is affecting the other person. Unless he has a good understanding of the kind of person he is and where his strengths and weaknesses lie, he will not be able to take corrective measures when his personality introduces negative elements into a situation.

Some of these limitations may be readily apparent. Others will come to mind only after some careful soul-searching and a self-critical attitude as he goes about his daily work. Of course, morbid introspection is not advocated. If one simply broods about his limitations, it amounts to less than nothing. If he takes positive, corrective action, he is well on the way to success. There is no person alive who cannot grow and develop further. If the motivation is there, the opportunity for growth and learning never ceases for as long as one lives.

Work Philosophy and Organization. The individual's philosophy of work is central to his effectiveness in this occupation. This role must give him satisfaction. The consultant's job most certainly calls for an intensive and often sustained effort. It is an exacting occupation whose tempo is often irregular and it calls for flexibility.

Mere intensity of effort is not enough. Energy must be channelled and utilized economically. The consultant has to be able to organize his time effectively and on his own initiative. He must be able to schedule and to plan ahead. He must be able to bring things to completion once they have been initiated. He must be sufficiently flexible, however, so that he can switch to another activity once the signals have been changed.

Once given a general directive, he should have sufficient imagination and resourcefulness to work out the specifics for himself. Although self-direction is important, the consultant should also know when to ask for help and not be afraid to request such assistance. He should also be prepared to assist his associates in the same fashion when they come to him for assistance. In this way, the team concept is facilitated, with both the client and the firm benefiting thereby.

Perhaps this picture of a consultant has been painted in somewhat idealistic terms. If this is so, there is no harm done. If we set our sights high, we progress upward. Each individual, consultant or whoever, has the choice and the responsibility to develop himself toward greater effectiveness in his job. Thinking about oneself is a first step in this direction. As Socrates stated many years ago, "the unexamined life is not worth living."