

The Trouble with Consultants

by Geoff Roberts MSc, FCIWEM, MCMI

Organisations large and small are increasingly bringing in consultants to help them – but do they really help, why should you bother and what pitfalls do you need to beware of? These tips from Geoff Roberts, himself a change leadership consultant who has extensive experience of working as a customer of and alongside other consultants, will help you make the most of your investment in consultancy.

7 Tips to get the best from your consultants

1. Stay in charge

“The man who pays the piper plays the tune” – that’s you and you need to set up a clear structure/process through which progress is reported, delays actioned and deliverables evaluated.

2. Be clear about deliverables

You know what’s wrong, and to get the best out of your consultants you need some idea of what’s needed to put it right. Now I know that sounds perverse – if you knew the answer you would not need the consultant – but what you need to agree **before signing the contract** (see Tip #3) – is what you want to be different when the consultancy has finished and what tangible deliverables will be produced

3. Beware scope creep

I once worked with a major international consultant who would not let me attend the weekly team meeting at which they allegedly discussed the progress of the project. Turns out that what they **were** discussing was progress on discovering possible further areas of work they could bid for – the team leader was even targeted on how much additional work he could generate! Tip #2 will help you keep their activities corralled to where you want them to work.

4. Avoid dependency

Your aim should be to get them in and out having done the job you clearly specified in Tip #2. I suggest that any consultant with integrity will not foster dependency but will, to the contrary, want to help you learn what you need to go solo in the future – see Tip #7 for how to do this.

5. Employ Experts – their staff are not there to learn at your expense

Consultancies employ large numbers of MBA graduates – and guess where they learn about the realities of consulting? Well, not in my business they don’t! I refuse to pay premium rates for inexperienced teenage scribblers (as a Finance Director I once worked with called them ☺). Make sure you have the final say on whoever they want to bring in to your project – check their CV’s as you would your own employees’ and reject anyone that the project lead cannot convince you has existing experience in your business and/or of the processes needed.

6. Listen to them

You are paying a lot of money to get knowledge and/or experience that you do not have. What they have to say might be challenging – that is exactly what they are there for, to challenge your thinking. Listen to what they have to say, challenge them back as to how their proposals fit your industry/company. Remember that the final decisions are always yours – see Tip #1.

7. Learn from them

Last, but by no means least, make sure that you learn all you can from them. You employed consultants because they brought something – expertise perhaps – that you did not have. Wouldn’t it be sad if you did not learn all you could from them. When setting up the engagement make absolutely sure that you commit one of your best people to partner the consultants with a brief to learn the why, what and how of the exercise.

Geoff Roberts runs Hidden Resources, a specialist personal, team and organisational change consultancy based in Leeds. He describes himself as a Catalyst, helping others to identify and make the changes they need in their own life. He has over 25 years’ of experience working with individuals, public sector, private and public companies and the third sector.

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