

## **Selling business change services: selling and delivery are the same**

Organisations providing IT or business-change services often see the sales process as very separate from the consulting process. Such a hard distinction is generally unhelpful and leads to salespeople who do not understand the service they are selling and consultants who cannot seize new opportunities. More fundamentally, it leads, over time, to worse outcomes for clients and poorer relationships between clients and consulting organisations.

An old boss of mine once remarked, with the air of someone letting me into a dark secret, "Remember, Chris, consulting is selling, and selling is consulting".

As a young, inexperienced but impressionable management consultant, the phrase certainly made an impression. But its significance to me at that time, was, to say the least, limited. Now, a few years on, the true importance of what that boss said is more apparent with every passing day.

As a young consultant starting out, I was aware that others – the consulting account managers – seemed to be the ones that did the selling and got the contract. My job was to execute – to get the project in on time and within budget. Selling was far from my mind.

And the account managers – with the exception of that old boss – often treated the closure of the sale as the end of the story: they had shifted the problem to the consultants, and they could move on to new challenges.

But over time I have realised that the division between selling and consulting is rather arbitrary and detracts from good management consulting: leaving the client in a better business situation than you found it.

Why is good consulting also good selling?

A good consultant works from a fundamental premise that his or her job is to help the client to move forward: to overcome a blockage, to resolve a problem, to create a strategy, to implement a solution. Yet, from the outset, clients only present what they see as the issue to be addressed. Sometimes the client is spot-on with his analysis. But often their proximity to the problem leads them to conceive solutions that do not address root causes. What does a consultant do during those initial days when the reasons for them being there seem to be unclear?

A good consultant seeks to be sure that the mandate they've been assigned makes sense and that the client has not missed something important. For example, an assignment to evaluate alternative systems solutions might quickly reveal the need, as a preliminary step, for a major business process change exercise. Or Board support might be lacking, indicating a need for a Board re-focusing effort. The aware consultant, confronted with this additional information gleaned from those early days, has two options: ignore it, get his or her head down and do what has been assigned, or seek to initiate an opportunity where he or she can present a well - argued case for reshaping the engagement.

The first option is the short-term, easy way out. The work can get done and the client's immediate need satisfied. But, a few months into the project, or even later, those original issues are likely to resurface. A client expecting big things from his consulting organisation is likely to ask why those issues were not raised.

If the second option is chosen there may well be a difficult initial discussion where the client questions the challenge being made. If the client accepts the points being made, the consultant is likely to move more quickly to being viewed as a trusted partner. What was, up to then, a straightforward IT engagement now takes on a broader and more strategic focus. The consultant has used his or her powers of analysis and persuasion to sell the wider issues. The engagement has increased in scope. Consulting has become selling.

And if the client rejects the challenge nothing has been lost. The IT assignment can at least make provision for the potential difficulties it may have to deal with. And if the issues resurface later in the project, the fact that they were raised and discussed at the start will be in the consultant's favour.

Why should a good sales situation also be good consulting? Too often consulting sales tend to be mechanistic: understand what the client is asking for and propose an engagement that

delivers what was asked at a price that will sell. But a good consulting salesperson will make sure not only that the engagement is clear but that it will result in the client's situation being improved for the long term. The salesperson is applying good consulting skills from the first meeting with the client. And the result may be a very different relationship with the client than was first likely. The scenario described earlier may well be repeated, this time being initiated entirely from a sales perspective. The sale is achieved but with much improved scope. The client has bought the benefits and the consulting organisation secured a larger and more profitable contract.

Making "selling consulting" and "consulting selling" is never easy. But the benefits for the consulting organisation and the client are deeper and more long-lasting. The consulting organisation secures larger engagements with greater financial rewards; the client gets a more certain and successful outcome.

Having the courage to do this requires the support of a consulting organisation with an acute awareness of how successful client relationships are built – through long term processes. More importantly, it requires that the consulting organisation has its own clear and well formed strategy, one based on the nurturing of long term trusted and strategic relationships.

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