



The Consultant's Handbook:

Sample Chapter

Generating Support and Buy In

7 - Generating Support and Buy In

How to stick the landing and get people to buy into your solution

Consultants like us - problem solvers - like to think that we are tellers of truth: data-driven, objective, analytical machines that solve problems through a combination of expertise, analysis, and rigorous process. The clarity of our investigation and the sheer brilliance of our solutions will win the day.

Sadly, there's one thing that always gets in the way: people.

People bring feelings, experiences, and biases (both for and against things) to the table. Everyone needs to be persuaded, but some also like to be flattered along the way. Others have to be reassured. A small percentage want to be feared.

None of this should be a surprise: people are complicated after all.

So, just as you need to understand the human aspects of the organization to diagnose their problem, you also need to think about how these same people can support or thwart your solution. That way, you'll be able to present your solution in a way that will minimize opposition while maximizing support.

However, this can be a significant challenge.

For example, it may be easy for you to identify that a senior executive is a naysayer who's preventing the organization from changing. However, you can't write 'the CFO is a barrier to success.' That makes the matter personal, and you've now made an enemy of a senior executive. You've reduced your chances of delivering a successful solution significantly.

But the CFO may well be what's getting in the way of solving the problem, so you can't just pretend that's not an issue.

The Consultant as Diplomat

The first thing is to keep in mind that your job is to deliver a solution to the firm's problem, not be 'right,' win every argument or show how clever you are.

Making people feel attacked, stupid, or regret what they did in the past will rob you of the goodwill and social capital you need to get them to adopt the solution they need.

So you need to take a diplomatic approach, reduce the opportunities for confrontation and remember that getting to the destination might require a circuitous route.

Being diplomatic is not always easy, and I would be lying if I said that I did this from day one as a consultant.

Being charitable, I was overly blunt and insensitive, pushing people towards the solution instead of guiding and supporting them. Less charitably, I was a real jerk.

Eventually, I learned that diplomacy was a better approach, and, more importantly, I began to understand what mattered in a commercial context which, unsurprisingly, was very different from the military one I had been used to.

However, being diplomatic doesn't mean backing down or being passive: you still need to do the right thing and deliver a solution that will work. But it does mean not leaving a trail of destruction behind you.

Being diplomatic and taking the client's perspective into account will help you show them how the solution you've identified will solve their issue and, importantly, allow you to persuade them to adopt it.

Four Rules for Generating Goodwill and Buy-In

Praise Is Personal, Criticism Anonymous

I always try to stick to the rule that praise is personal criticism is anonymous. Identify people who do a good job or are particularly insightful or positive but don't name people or teams who are getting in the way¹.

Also, be careful not to personalize something by attributing it to a person when it was a business decision.

For example, writing 'the CFO wouldn't fund the project' is incorrect unless she deliberately red-lined that item. More often, it's the case that there was insufficient funding and other projects took a higher priority. (This aligns with the 'don't make criticism personal' rule above.)

Depersonalizing anything negative will generate goodwill and build positive relationships without creating enemies.

Assume That People Are Rational

There's almost always a rational explanation for things at the time, even if it doesn't make sense later on.

I want to stress this point: there's almost always a rational explanation for things, even if you can't see it at first. People don't generally show up at work determined to do a bad job or make dumb decisions.

Therefore, you have to work out why someone did something that hurt the company, was opposed to something that seems otherwise sensible, or made a poor decision.

- An important project wasn't funded properly? Maybe there were higher priorities.
- A plan was poorly written? Perhaps that person asked to do that wasn't a technical writer.

¹ The exception is if there is an investigatory or audit component to what you are doing. In these cases, you may need to identify both the champions and villains in the story but do so clinically and use evidence to support your observations.

- A decision threw the firm into disarray? Maybe the outcomes weren't clear at the time and that was the best option given the information they had.

Again, this took me a while to realize, but these days, I don't believe that anyone goes to work and thinks, 'I'm going to do a crappy job today.' So, I ask myself, 'what were the circumstance at the time that would someone lead to this decision or action?'

Defuse Problems Early

Think about how you can defuse challenges or objections early. Saying 'this option requires no additional budget' removes funding concerns immediately. (As long as what you're saying is true.)

Recruit Allies

Find influencers who can help change minds and attitudes and recruit allies who will see the benefits of what you are doing. And keep in mind that the benefits of your solution might be broader than solving the immediate problem.

I was once trying to justify a reasonably significant spend on an access-control system at a construction site. The card-access system we wanted was a definite improvement over the paper ID checks the guards carried out, but it was a lot of money to improve something that already worked after a fashion.

However, I spoke to the heads of HR and Safety and explained that the same system would help with time and attendance (thus reducing timesheet fraud) and help monitor who was in the process areas (which would be a big help in the event of an accident). Suddenly, I had two very influential supporters which made getting approval much easier.

Knowing When to Push and Pull

To effect change, you sometimes need people to confront hard truths. Remember, many organizations find themselves in trouble because their leadership did something wrong. Everyone knows it, but that doesn't mean they'll want to talk about their mistakes.

However, you will have to get them to confront their previous mistakes to solve the problem and move things forward. Confronting hard truths requires some coaxing and pushing, but

there's a point where pushing stops being helpful and becomes damaging. You need to know where that line is and know exactly how close you're getting so you don't go too far.

Similarly, you need a few tricks up your sleeve to pull everyone back from the edge when things get too heated or stressed. That might start by acknowledging that some of the topics up for discussion will be difficult. Establish yourself as a lifeguard or safety value and let everyone know you'll stop things from getting out of hand.

During the discussions, try to prevent personal attacks or accusations. If attacks occur, ask people to reframe what they are saying to be productive, not just a criticism.

Asking people to restate things less emotionally and more factually is a big help. EG, "*Logistics weren't able to supply the material we needed in time, so my guys in manufacturing fell behind*" is easier to work with than "*Jim's team over in Logistics screwed up and let us down.*")

Most important, don't take things personally. You might find that you feel attacked, even if someone is using you as a way to attack someone else. Leaving your ego outside the room and being prepared to act as an emotional sponge is a valuable thing to learn, although it can be draining.

Lastly, simple things to help defuse tension are taking breaks, using appropriate humor, or simply stating that you're getting off course. But don't pretend the discussion didn't happen and just move on. There are valuable lessons in these problematic discussions, so let some pressure out of the room but come back to these issues later.

And don't forget to thank people for their contributions and acknowledge any difficulties after the discussion.

Whatever you do, remember to be gentle: this is tricky stuff, and people will be under a lot of pressure to fix things. You're there to help, not make things worse.

So, make sure you arrive with the full range of technical, procedural, and diplomatic tools.

In short, make sure you bring your EQ as well as your IQ.

Who'd have thought that there's so much psychology to being a consultant?

Stick The Landing

Keep these points in mind because you'll need to employ all of these at some stage.

And it's critical that you do: if you can't get people to accept your observations and buy into your solution, your work has been for nothing. The problem will still be there, and the firm will remain stuck and unable to move forward. So don't let things slip at this late stage.

Instead, stay focused, generate support, reduce tensions, and stick the landing.

I hope you enjoyed this sample chapter of The Consultant's Handbook.

The complete handbook gives you everything you need to turn your expertise into a successful consulting business. It's everything I've learned after over 20 years as a consultant plus I've included the tools and templates I've used for engagements with some of the biggest firms in the world.

If you're ready to start your solo career as a consultant, or just want to hone your skills, The Consultant's Handbook will give you everything you need.

[Learn more and get your copy here](#)

