

Why Management Consultants

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The management consultant has come to be taken for granted. But the management consultant is an extraordinary and indeed a truly unique phenomenon.

There is no precedent for him and no parallel. The management consultant is not only a major part of the practice of management. He has been, above all, central to the development of the theory, the discipline, and the profession of management.

There is “management science” and there is “art” in management. But management itself is a “practice”, just as is law and medicine. In every practice, it is the practitioner rather than the scholar who develops the discipline, who synthesizes experience into testable concepts, that is into theory, who codifies, who finds and tests new knowledge, and who teaches and sets the example. In every practice, it is the practitioner who leads the profession and who has responsibility, both for the advancement of its capacity to perform and for its ethics.

It should thus not be much of a surprise that among the great men of management there are only two pure scholars, Max Weber and Elton Mayo.

In this respect, management is indeed no different from medicine or from law, where the pure scholars are commentators and codifiers. But management is very different in respect to the kind of practitioner who has been a leader and a founding father.

To be sure, there are among management's great names quite a few pure practitioners, that is, people who made major contribution in and through their own work and leadership: a Towne, for instance, a Pierre DuPont or an Alfred Sloan, to name some of the Americans; a Georg Siemens in Germany, or a Hans Renold in Great Britain.

Management also has its practitioner-scholars. In the early years there was Shibusawa Eichii in Meiji Japan; Seebom Rowntree, Henri Fayol, and Walter Rathenau in Europe before World War I; and Chester Barnard in the interwar years. These men, like medicine's William Osler or Chief Justice Coke in the law, were eminent practitioners who then distilled a lifetime of experience and performance into pioneering theory and management philosophy.

But what is unique to management is that from the very beginning the consultant played a key role in the development of the practice, the knowledge and the profession of management. There

were Frederick W. Taylor, Gantt and the Gilbreths; Eugen Schmalenbach and Mary Parker Follett; Lyndall Urwick and Harold Smiddy.

There are counselors and advisors in other areas, too. But only in management is there the professional consultant. And only in management has the consultant become a central figure as a practitioner, but also as the fountainhead of knowledge, as the leader in thought, in conceptualization, and in establishing a profession. Surely, this is a remarkable phenomenon. But even more remarkable is that apparently no one has yet asked, "Why management consultants?"

One reason for the role of the consultant in management is precisely that management is a practice rather than a science or an art. In a practice, one gains insight through practice. One learns by synthesizing experience into knowledge. One advances by testing concepts on cases. To be sure, exposure by itself is not enough, for it may only mean busyness. But in a practice, one cannot learn without exposure. There are no "thought experiments" in a practice, but also there is no laboratory. There are only cases. Without exposure to cases, a practice can develop neither a body of knowledge nor the practitioner's own diagnostic capacity and

professional character. In medicine, the exposure is built into both training and practice. The cases are in the hospital or come into the physician's office. In the law, exposure is built into the practice and can be simulated in the classroom. In management, however, if the practitioner is a practicing executive, he lacks exposure. He has enough practice, but it is mostly, if not always, with the same "patient." He works with the same organization – or at most, with very few. He lacks exposure and cannot gain it. Nor can he simulate it.

And this, clearly, is the first reason why the management consultant emerged, both in the practice and in the discipline of management. The consultant is a practitioner and, in this respect, like any other executive. But unlike the executive in the organization, the consultant has exposure. He sees and treats, as it were, a great many patients and studies a great many cases. He has exposure in depth, but also in breadth and variety. Even the most conceited consultant would not claim that he knows more than his clients, the executives in organizations. Indeed, every consultant knows that his clients are his teachers and that he lives off their knowledge. The consultant does not know more. But he has seen more.

But there is a subtler and perhaps even more important reason for the emergence and the importance of the consultant in the practice, the discipline, and the profession of management. "It is a fool who has himself for a client," says an old legal proverb. And physicians learned long ago not to treat their own families, let alone them themselves.

The professional needs commitment to the client's cause or to the patient's recovery. But he must stay free of involvement. He must not himself be a part of the problem. And the practitioner executive is always a part of the problem, is, indeed, as Chester Barnard first pointed out, always the main problem. The practitioner-executive cannot treat his organization without treating himself. That his own interests are at stake is probably quite irrelevant; the present-day belief that a responsible professional cannot rise above his own self-interest is little but vulgar superstition. But the executive in an organization is also always a member of the organization, shares its traditions, its beliefs, its joys and its sorrows, its greatness and its pettinesses. He is like the physician who treats his own family – he diagnoses with the heart and always takes his own pulse rather than that of the patient.

And thus, the management consultant brings to the practice of management what being professional requires: detachment. He makes it possible to have a professional diagnostician in management, a professional therapist and a true scholar. In other words, he makes it possible for management to be a practice and yet be a profession and a discipline.

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