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The Value of a Good Consultant



THE VALUE OF A (GOOD) CONSULTANT

As with any investment, the results of retaining a consultant depend upon the quality of the consultant and your willingness to engage with that consultant.

By Lance Tullius

NEARLY ALL OF US, AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, HAVE HIRED A CONSULTANT. And most of us have had experiences with consultants that have proved rewarding as well as some that have been disappointing.

Have you ever thought about what made the rewarding experience fulfilling and the disappointing experience not so rewarding? There are two fundamental ingredients that determine the outcome of any consultant/client relationship, each of equal importance: the quality of the consultant and the extent to which you as the client truly engage in the process for which you've hired the consultant to assist.

Finding a quality consultant requires diligence as well as a comfort level so that you can work effectively with the consultant. Also, there is a leap of faith one takes when retaining an "outsider."

The other ingredient—how much you're prepared to actually engage with the consultant—is often neglected when assessing the value that a consultant can bring to you. In many instances, we know the right thing to do is to secure the services of an expert. Yet when it comes time to execute and make decisions per the "experts" recommendations, many of us pull back and revert to our comfort zone. As a result, the process becomes counterproductive and a major waste of time and money. And, despite what many of us might think, a good consultant, regardless of how much they're paid to perform their services, measures his success in terms of results and his compensation as a byproduct of these results.

This combined power of a seasoned consultant and a client who is truly committed to working with the consultant to achieve a stated objective is immense. To that end, the janitorial industry benefits from a large pool of consultants that specialize in a wide variety of disciplines. In addition, the industry itself is massive, with nearly all of its players looking for ways to improve their businesses and address specific issues and concerns. This convergence presents a compelling opportunity for businesses of all sizes and types to access real-time and value-added expertise in order to utilize their business as a vehicle for achieving desired goals. Effectively, every company has the opportunity to achieve "best in class" status.

For those who do their homework in finding the right consultant and then commit themselves to the process, the resulting value can be seen in a variety of means and forms. First and foremost, a good consultant brings an independent and objective perspective to your business.

By our nature, people are egocentric to a degree, and from time to time (hopefully it's only from time to time) we get mired in the day-to-day goings-on of our own business. No matter how skilled we might be, we view our businesses from our own perspectives, incorporating all of our learned and unlearned biases, stereotypes and conclusions, many of

which may have applied at one point in time, but perhaps no longer.

An independent consultant, rather than an employee, partner, friend or spouse, will proactively challenge these long-held assumptions and, in almost every case, will at a minimum help their client see other perspectives through which to view their business and the surrounding forces that impact it. This aspect of a consultant's role can in itself lead to groundbreaking improvements.

Another benefit of the best consultants that is so often underappreciated is the bank of intelligence they can bring to your business as a direct result of having seen hundreds, if not thousands, of businesses similar to your own. This benefit is even more profound when working with consultants who specialize in your industry. I sometimes run into business owners that participate in peer groups made up of other business owners in their same industry. They say that the peer group functions as a quasi-consultant and even displaces the need for a consultant. I think peer groups are a great thing and can be a tremendous resource. Furthermore, I think consultants should be retained to address specific issues or goals, whereas I believe being part of a peer group can be a longer-term or even permanent initiative. Having said that, a peer group should never replace the idea of bringing a consultant on board

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to help you with a specific element of your business, be it short or long term. A consultant that has seen the inner workings of numerous businesses in your industry and has been able to assess the cause-and-effect relationship between various expenditures, initiatives, mandates and strategies can quickly hone in on already-tested solutions for effectively achieving a specific result you're looking for. Unlike a peer group, where some members might fear exposing their vulnerabilities, an objective consultant can protect the confidentiality of every client it has worked with, yet quickly and accurately cull from a variety of other companies (the good stuff and the bad) to advise you relative to your own business. With the right consultant, there will be

no sugar coating or framing the story they want you to hear as opposed to the one you should hear.

Oftentimes, in situations where consultants are retained, they will deal with multiple people within or outside of a particular business, in some ways working as an intermediary. This is not to say that these situations will necessarily involve adversarial dealings, but in almost all such circumstances, the consultant's value will be gauged at least in part on his or her ability to bring together or galvanize a group of people. In these cases, an experienced consultant can be a significant aid in lessening and even perhaps removing the emotions of the relevant parties. Emotions can be (and often are) the barrier to what otherwise would be productive and satisfying outcomes.

While consultants can definitely play a key role in helping you achieve your business goals, they are not the answer for everyone. Regardless of how storied a consultant's track record is, if you're not prepared to completely embrace the relationship and exercise at hand, the resulting outcome will be one of more questions than answers.

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