

Ten Characteristics of Excellent Nonprofit Consultants

With multiple demands and many opportunities to serve and strengthen people in need, wouldn't you like to know who could help your organization? In the current economic and social climate, nonprofits are coming under increasing scrutiny for financial accountability. More and more nonprofits are competing for scarce resources, while leaders of nonprofits search for efficient and effective ways to continue to make a difference in the lives of people they serve. Do you want to spend your money wisely with value-added results? Do you also want to hire consultants who can deliver those results?

Excellent nonprofit consultants are numerous here in the state of Georgia, but how do you know who is the right person for your organization? Below are ten characteristics of Excellent Nonprofit Consultants that will help you to develop, sustain or build greater capacity for your organization.

1. Sector experience

Some consultants have broad experience in working with both for-profit and nonprofit organizations; some also have success with government agencies or educational institutions. Most important is that the consultant understands the sector, and has worked with a variety of nonprofit organizations. Understanding the sector includes awareness of the needs of organizations and support for the charitable missions of nonprofits.

Many fine consultants have worked for numerous for-profit corporations for several years and have honed their specialties in executive suites or on management teams. Their experience is valuable and instructive for their sector populations and can produce transferable skills and knowledge for nonprofit consultations.

Although there are similarities operationally, there are also distinct differences between the sectors that must be acknowledged and respected. While for-profits make products and offer services, *nonprofits make a difference*.

2. Responsiveness

Consultants realize that they cannot be all things to all people; so excellent consultants are part of an extensive network of colleagues who have various areas of expertise. Being able to respond quickly to a nonprofit leader's request is a strong characteristic of an excellent consultant. Delays can be costly for organizations that work within funding constraints and guidelines, and that need results sometimes to ensure continued funding. Excellent consultants are able to match the organization's needs with the best resources, and as such can be an important broker as well as a provider of consulting services.

3. Diagnostic listening

Regardless of the sector experience or the responsiveness of the consultant, an excellent consultant must be one who engages in diagnostic listening. Clarity and agreement on where to start the work and what the intended results are for the organization are essential aspects of the relationship between the consultant and the client organization. Listening for possibilities allows the consultant to frame the issues or concerns into a coherent, mutually agreed-upon proposal for change. An excellent consultant listens to the client and for indicators of where the organization is stuck – unable to move toward their desired direction. A major goal of consulting is to help the client to become aware of where it is stuck and to mobilize the client's energy to take actions for change.

4. Collaborative and facilitative

No one knows the organization better than the organization itself, but sometimes its view is clouded by day-to-day realities. Organizational intelligence or wisdom, however, is the guidance for the work of the consultant. Excellent consultants value the collaborative and facilitative roles that they must play in order to fully engage the client in the work. Consulting is not something the consultant does to or for the client, but rather an approach to working with the client. The collaborative stance helps the client to make decisions about priorities and whether to address opportunities for change. Throughout the consulting engagement, the consultant collaborates with the client to frame the areas of concern, agree on intended results, set priorities, arrange a timeline for completion of the work and identify criteria for success.

5. Honors and acknowledges resistance

Consulting services almost always involve managing change; with change comes resistance. Since resistance is a natural component of the change process, much like getting older is a natural part of continuing to live, an excellent consultant honors and acknowledges resistance. Resistance can be useful to a change process because it alerts both the consultant and the organization that some aspect of the process may be ineffective or does not have broad agreement. Listening for possibilities from resistant people within the organization can often help clients to avoid venturing down a difficult path. Indeed, the path of least resistance can be a more successful one.

6. Objectivity

Managing resistance requires an objectivity that excellent consultants maintain. Since organizations have both boards and staff, an objective consultant is one who is able to listen for possibilities within both groups, value multiple perspectives, and articulate the areas where there are both opportunities for change and

resistance to change. Excellent consultants avoid collusion, i.e., taking sides with either staff or board members in a change process, but rather maintain a clear boundary between the work of the consultant and the work of the client. Such boundary management is actually the management of relationships, where the consultants balance the internal emotion of empathy with their growing awareness of the organization.

7. Extensive resource support

While excellent consultants use their awareness of what is happening in the organization to manage relationships, resistance and opportunities for change; they also maintain their awareness of nonprofit sector trends and continually expand their network and connections to human and information resources. Excellent consultants have access to the latest research on topics that nonprofits care about, and can provide data and information to guide an organization's decisions or help to set priorities. Consultants have access to databases, studies and professional colleagues who keep them abreast of best practices among similar organizations, in the sector and in other industries.

8. Values diversity

Nonprofits make a difference in the lives of a diversity of people by strengthening and supporting people who without their help would have a less favorable quality of life. Excellent consultants not only respect the mission and values of the organizations they serve, but also respect the recipients of the services that the organizations provide. Valuing diversity requires a sensitivity to and awareness of the organization's geographical environment, history and strategic directions. Without that appreciation, diversity cannot be a consideration in the change process, and the absence can be detrimental to the success of the project. Racial, gender, language, geographical and socioeconomic differences, if discounted, can derail the change process and jeopardize results. The consultant has an ethical responsibility to include others and to provide feedback to organizations about considerations of diversity that have an impact on the work.

9. Thinks Conceptually

From the initial meeting or telephone conversation with a client until the closure of the project or service to the client, the consultant engages in the artistry of consulting, i.e., paying attention to where the organization is stuck; recognizing the tension in the organization between what is currently happening and what it wants to happen; and, identifying what the organization has the energy, willingness and resources to change. Excellent consultants develop an awareness of themes and patterns of thoughts or perspectives, expressed feelings and demonstrated behaviors that describe the complexity of the organization, but also isolate the elements that stand out. In short, excellent consultants are conceptual; they are able to articulate the themes and patterns in a way that raises

organizational awareness and mobilizes the organization to shift its direction or change.

10. Results focused

Excellent consulting is an investment for the consultant and the organization. Most investors want a return on their investment. Nonprofits want to know that if they deliver a program or service, there will be a positive impact on the population they serve. When a consultant plans to follow-up within a specified period of time, it sets expectations for sustained impact, but also characterizes the seriousness of the relationship between the consultant and the client organization. Excellent consultants care about the quality and sustainability of their work.

Excellent consultants want positive results, but also positive impacts on the organization and ultimately the organization's clients. Consultants too make an investment; their return on the investment is...

- A stronger more vibrant organization that has greater visibility and recognition through marketing and branding
- Better leadership and board governance
- Alignment of programs and mission
- Better organizational structures
- Financial accountability
- Efficient processes and systems
- Improved technology planning and management
- Exemplary ethics
- Positioning for advocacy

Knowing when and how to seek outside expertise is critical to a nonprofit's success. Knowing whom to hire for a project is just as important for successful results.

Eleanor Hooks, Ph.D., *president of The Smart Change Group, Inc., is an organization development consultant with over 24 years experience working with nonprofit and for-profit leaders. Please visit her website at www.smartchangenow.com or call 770-364-6785.*