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## ***THE CONSULTANT'S HIDDEN ROLES*** **by Joey Tamer [www.joeytamer.com](http://www.joeytamer.com)**

As a consultant, there are various hidden roles you play that are never written into your contract. Mastery of these roles moves your service from good to excellent to indispensable.

A consultant enters a company as an expert and as an outsider. Respected or suspected by the teams you are hired to help, you can use your expertise and your position as an outsider to your advantage.

### **Listening**

Of first importance is the ability to listen – long, in detail and without imposing your expertise before you have listened well to your client and all the players. Do not offer suggestions early. Get the whole picture before you begin to make recommendations, much less changes. Even under time pressure, do your listening and question-asking before you make a move.

Listen closely to your client's perception of the issues. Make certain you understand the details and personalities which the client believes are contributing to the problem. Re-state what the client wants accomplished, not what you mean to do to achieve it. As you work, be candid with your client about the picture that is emerging, even if it differs from his or her perception.

Apply the same patience and thoroughness when listening to the team(s). Go back a second time through the team with questions as you learn more, so you are sure you have a clear picture of the problem you are hired to solve. It may not be the problem you signed on to fix (in which case return to your client and re-define the problem and your work).



### **Acknowledging**

One of the qualities of excellent listening is to fully acknowledge what you are hearing, and to not criticize it. See the speaker in his or her full situation, and acknowledge the difficulty or constraints you are hearing. Disregard what you have heard from others while acknowledging. You won't have the whole picture until much later.

### **Gaining Trust**

This awareness and acknowledgement is essential to creating trust. You will be seen as an agent of the management which has hired you. But compassionate, open listening and actions to support the team will gain their trust.

Keeping confidences is also essential to creating trust. By using your influence with the management, you can present what the team needs, stated in management's interest: "Allowing sales to add that extra headcount 60 days earlier than planned will not hurt cash-flow, and may be the difference in making the next-quarter numbers we promised the Board." Notice that no request has been made by anyone in Sales, and no one has been named. In this way, you will become effective as a liaison between teams and management, and between teams with other teams.

Two teams were not communicating well about the new release of a product, and were getting surly. I had gained the trust of each vice president by listening well for many weeks, and attended a private meeting of the two VPs and their CEO. I did nothing but create an environment for clarity: I asked the CEO to not interrupt at all. I asked that each VP present his information completely without interruption by the other. This environment allowed each to define his issues, hear one another fully, and resolve the issues. I knew I had succeeded when one of the VPs said to me, "That was great. See? You didn't need to be here at all."

### **Ongoing, deeper acknowledgement**

I responded, "You did great. Thank you for being so patient and clear."

You can be in a position, as liaison between management and your team(s), to act as an information source in both directions, since you have the trust from all parties. You can clarify management's directives into the larger strategic framework, so the team understands why management has set these directives. For the team, you can run interference with management that the team needs to be left without interference to complete its work, or needs a longer time-frame for delivery, or must have more support.



And you can offer the encouragement, acknowledgement and praise that is often lacking from management.

“I know you are working long evenings and your family is mad at you. I will help any way I can. And thank you.”

“Of course you should vent your frustration to me ~ I’m the outsider, you can be safe telling me.”

“I am copying you on the schedule, in case you need it... the other team didn’t understand you would need this in advance. I’ve asked them to keep you on the list in the future.”

“You did a great job. I’ll say something about it to the CEO, and at the team meeting next week. They should all understand what you contributed.”

These hidden roles are profoundly important in a consultant’s work, and can enhance the client-companies’ success. Often times, when a consultant is praised – “I couldn’t have done it without her” – it is just these subtle roles that are being complimented.

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