

The Consultative Approach

Reviewed by James H. Kennedy

Here's a book that can help you sort out your priorities and parse what you really do for a living, and in so doing make you a better--and more fulfilled--consultant.

How often in the last year have you had a chance to sit back and assess what you do?

Or are you so caught up in the whirligig of deadlines and travel that you've become an automaton, routinely stamping out predictable reactions and solutions to client problems? Will it ever end? Will you ever catch up?

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Here's a book that doesn't even mention the word "consulting," but that's what it's all about. (Perhaps preference for the term "consultative approach" can be traced to co-author Suzanne Saxe, who has a doctorate in education!)

Slicing and dicing their analysis and recommendations into bite-sized bits, the authors offer a panoply of checklists such as this one:

Eight roles that successful consultants play:

1. problem-solver
2. strategist
3. facilitator
4. technical expert
5. coach
6. influencer
7. administrator
8. and most of all, partner

The authors continue, "The key to keeping the three elements of people, process, and expertise in balance is partnering: thinking and behaving collaboratively, not just providing a service. Working consultatively, as a partner, enables you to produce the best results possible under the circumstances and at the same time develop a mutually beneficial relationship."

Five questions to ask clients as you get started:

1. Ask "what?" rather than "why?"
2. Talk outcomes, not problems.
3. Focus on the situation by asking what has been tried and what worked or didn't work.
4. Ask the client to be specific.
5. Focus on the client by asking value-based questions.

Three ways to improve your listening skills:

1. Pay attention to your internal filters.
2. Listen to body language, tone of voice, and words spoken.
3. Listen for specifics about your client and the situation.

And so it goes. If all this sounds elementary to you, slip the book into a brown paper cover so you won't be caught reading it. This book will force you to analyze what you do and improve your service to your clients (and, hopefully, ease things up at home when you get home Friday night with a smile on your face instead of a scowl as you run for that first martini!)

Both Virginia LaGrossa and Suzanne Saxe are California consultants who, through consulting and workshops, help clients to "build business partnerships and integrate organizational strategies with individual performance." Apologia: Pardon our enthusiasm for this book, and much of what's written has been said before in one way or another. But so little material is available on the consulting process that we pounce on anything that looks even remotely helpful. Buy this book to read and study on your own, or organize a more formal series of sessions within your firm-- and let us know if you find this book helpful. Order through your local bookseller or direct from publisher Jossey-Bass at 800-274-4434 for \$39.95.

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