

Hiring a Consultant?

How To Get What You Need Without Getting Burned

By James C. Galvin



The board of a large, parachurch agency wanted help thinking through the rapid changes they were experiencing. They decided to bring in a senior consultant from a big-name secular consulting firm, but didn't get the results they'd expected. The executive director summed it up by commenting, "Several weeks and thousands of dollars later, we're no further ahead than when we started."



A major relief organization decided to undertake a reengineering project in several key divisions. The leaders interviewed three consultants and, being good stewards, hired the one offering the lowest price. "I guess we got what we paid for," says their president. They're now bringing in a more experienced consultant to fix the mess created by the first.



The pastor of a rapidly growing church signed a six-month contract with an expert consultant to help the staff team with strategic planning. Though the consultant knew how to help entrepreneurs grow businesses, it became painfully obvious by the first coffee break that he knew almost nothing about the challenges facing larger churches.

Nobody wants a bad experience with a consultant, or to bring in an outsider who can't deliver. Accordingly, some ministries wait until it's too late and others avoid using consultants altogether.

These organizations often miss key opportunities for improvement and growth. Others bring in consultants when they need them but feel they're running a risk every time. Here are some steps that will help you reduce that risk.

Decide What You Really Need

Begin by spending time thinking about what you really need. You might not know why something isn't working the way you want, but what do you expect the consultant to do for you? What results would you like to see?

What you really need may fall into one of three categories: expertise, time or perspective. If you lack the expertise you

need, you may want to bring in an expert to do the work, or pass on the knowledge and skill to your staff.

If time is the problem, you may want to retain outside people on a limited basis to help you hit a deadline. Or, you may only need temporary help from a consultant in an area where hiring staff doesn't make sense.

The third possibility is that you need fresh perspective. This might be the greatest asset a consultant has to offer. You can ask only for an assessment, which leads to new insights, or you can also ask for a change process, which leads to improvement. Getting this clear up front will help you find someone who can deliver.

There's a perception among church and parachurch leaders that you turn to a consultant only when your organization is in trouble. As one CEO of an established institution recently told me, "I would never bring in a consultant because that would be the same as admitting I couldn't do my job." But many leading ministries also turn to consultants to help develop new capacities.

For example, if you need a new strategy for ministry growth, it not only makes sense to hire a consultant who can help, but one who can also pass on these skills and process to your key staff. This gets the job done and provides the capacity to do it in-house the next time around.

Find The Right Level

Another way to reduce risk is to find a person who is a good fit for the project. Has he or she worked with organizations similar to yours?

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Matching your need with the consultant's areas of expertise is one aspect of finding a good fit.

Another aspect, less obvious but just as important, is finding the right level. Just as athletes play on semi-pro, professional or all-star teams, consultants also play on different levels. (See the chart: *What Kind of Consultant Do You Need?*) In general, the higher you go up the ladder, the better the consultant will be at understanding and handling complexity. The lower you go, the less it costs.

The value comes in matching your level of need with the right level of consultant. If you just need someone to help facilitate a meeting, don't fly in a "major league player." Someone with skill who lives within driving distance will do fine. But if you're dealing with a major strategic decision, such as renaming your organization or relocating your headquarters, look for the best money will buy.

For a small problem, anyone with expertise in that area will do. But if you have a "huge mess" on your hands, you need someone experienced in handling complex organizational dynamics.

Make Sure You Click

Another way to reduce risk is to find a consultant you enjoy being around—someone you click with. Do you feel energized or drained after being with this person? Do you learn something every time you're together or are you the one doing the teaching?

Interpersonal skills are just as important as special expertise for a beneficial consulting experience. If the consultant knows a lot about something, but can't seem to get the information across to you or your staff, you're not getting full value from the relationship.

A vice president of one ministry told me that while her organization works with a lot of different consultants, she finds more than half of them fail to build rapport. She commented, "They have the expertise we need, but it's so hard to bring them up to speed, and to pull the right information out of them, it almost isn't worth the effort."

You need to establish a relationship characterized by authenticity, genuineness and respect. In this kind of atmosphere, neither side feels a need to impress the other. You shouldn't see any

What Kind Of Consultant Do You Need?			
<i>Consultants are like baseball players. Though they all may do it for a living, they don't all play in the same league. The higher you go on the chart, the better the consultant will be at handling complexity. The lower you go, the less you'll have to pay. Match your need with the right level of player.</i>			
Level	Type	Description	Unique Benefits
All Stars	Full time	These are the top dogs. They are sought after for speaking appearances and usually have a best-selling book or two. Look to them first when money is no object.	When you bring in a big name, your staff will sit up and listen.
Major Leaguers	Full time	These are the consultants who deal with major organizations and major problems in smaller organizations. Their consulting approach is based on best practices. They are well networked, have a national reputation, and a broad range of clients. Their fees tend to be higher than other providers.	Seasoned professionals who can handle complex organizational dynamics.
Professionals	Full time/ Part time	These are people engaged in consulting as a career, either full time or part time. They have experience and expertise in focused areas. They tend to charge the going rate for their area of specialty.	Skilled specialists who can deliver what you need when you need it.
Semi-Pros	Part time	These resource people consult part time. They may be on staff with a university or another organization that allows them time for this wider ministry. They will tend to have a local or regional client base and work with small to mid-sized organizations. They tend to charge less than the going rate.	Good people who are good at what they do.
Local Heroes	Part time/ Volunteer	These are individuals who desire to help nonprofits. They tend to work with community-based organizations and local churches. They are best dealing with tame problems requiring common sense and an ability to plan. They have low overhead and don't have to bill for travel costs.	Faithful, available and less expensive.

signs of arrogance on the part of the consultant, or feel undue pressure to close the deal. If you're not clicking, it's best to cut it off right away.

Get It In Writing

After finding a good consultant, the best way to minimize risk is by written agreement. Trust is vital in a consulting relationship and some leaders think operating on a handshake is the best way to demonstrate it. Often, this works fine, but sometimes it doesn't.

A few larger organizations use formal contracts for every consulting relationship; others find this oppressive or too expensive. The middle ground is to ask the consultant to draft a letter of agreement. It may not stand up in court, but it gets expectations clearly stated and prevents misunderstandings later.

The letter, in addition to the fee, should describe the services to be performed. The advice of a seasoned fund raising consultant is, "focus on deliverables." This helps make the desired end result clear to everyone.

If you're contracting for a long period of time, ask the consultant to include termination arrangements, so you don't wind up paying for a project you no longer need because your strategic situation has changed. The trend among faith-based organizations is to contract with consultants for shorter time frames—three to six months is typical. For a larger project, break the contract into several phases.

How do you negotiate the best deal financially? It usually boils down to a flat fee or daily rate. If you have a set budget, you might be more comfortable with a

Major Challenges Parachurch Leaders Face

- Funding for survival and growth.
- Finding talented staff.
- Developing leadership at all levels.
- Planning in a rapidly changing environment.
- Keeping the vision fresh and communicating it effectively.
- Partnering effectively with local churches and other agencies.
- Dealing with major organizational transitions.
- Finding safe places for personal growth and development.

Based on research conducted by James C. Galvin & Associates in 1999, these are the biggest challenges parachurch leaders face today. Experienced consultants are available to assist leaders with any of these challenges.

flat rate. But consultants have to anticipate problems that may occur, and budget accordingly. If you want to pay the lowest amount, a daily rate is usually best. But when you hit time-consuming complications, it could end up costing you more. The bigger problem is that you won't know what the final bill will be.

One experienced consultant recently told me, "Nonprofit organizations usually prefer a flat fee when working with a new consultant. I've found that if the first project goes well, the next level of trust and relationship allows for a daily rate, with the total amount open-ended. Both parties must agree that the project will take as long as it takes, giving the consultant maximum flexibility to deliver exactly what the client needs at the lowest cost."

Consulting Is A Growing Trend

Consultants, used strategically, can be extremely beneficial to your organization. You can eliminate most of the risk with a few simple safeguards. Essentially, take time to find the right fit with the right person and get it in writing. The Christian Management Association is a

good example of an organization that uses consultants extensively with outstanding results, allowing it to extend its reach and initiate strategic projects in ways that demonstrate good stewardship of financial resources.

Church and parachurch organization leaders are increasingly turning to consultants to help with their rapidly changing circumstances. They can now choose from more than a thousand consultants who primarily serve faith-based organizations. Many won't fit your need, but the right consultant can help you be more effective in ministry, build staff capacity, and allow your organization to have a greater impact for God's kingdom.

Jim Galvin is president of James C. Galvin & Associates, Inc., an organizational consulting firm based in Winfield, Illinois. He specializes in leadership and strategy for parachurch organizations, and is CMA's lead consultant for designing and developing its new Executive Leadership Program. You may contact him at jim.galvin@bigfoot.com.

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