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A GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR EXPERTISE USED



4TH EDITION

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Founded by Peter Block in 1980, Designed Learning was established to offer workshops based on the ideas in his books, including his most well-known works, *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* and *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. Since then, the team at Designed Learning has delivered training to thousands of people in 35 countries and 5 languages, internally for global companies and in public, open enrollment workshops.

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WILEY

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To Leslie Stephen, who is a genius in bringing clarity, order, and insight to words.

ALSO BY PETER BLOCK

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INTRODUCTION:

WHAT IS ENDURING | WHAT IS NEW | KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Welcome to Flawless 4.0, the 4th edition of *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*. The purpose of this version is to retain what has been important about the book, and then infuse it with what is occurring in this moment in time. It offers further distinctions, clarity of language, and applications that have accumulated over the years. It is an act of adaptation to ways the world has changed. And not changed. The intention is to affirm what is timeless and worth re-engaging more clearly and to translate this to the talking and wave patterns that are the winds on the surface of the sea nowadays.

We hear every day that we live in an era of constant and radical change. Science and digital technology are the headlines. We have adopted the language of disruption. What is new and next is the core value of modernism. Marketed as the Information Age. The Digital Age.

Underneath this storyline resides the human condition. In all its forms, whether in personal, organizational, or community life. In peace or violence. Poetry or politics. This condition—which is essentially dependent on relationships, whether virtual, artificially intelligent, or live, PowerPointed or handwritten—is enduring, compelling, and certainly problematic in all its forms. Perhaps by design and in the nature of things.

The context of the human condition is what keeps shifting. This requires fitting the core elements of consulting skills into a way of creating an alternative to the still-overriding belief in control, consistency, and predictability. It means informing by our actions, our institutions to what it means to be human. This is the permanent meaning of what is expressed in this book. And, the intent of sustaining our humanity is also a way of having influence when you have no control. Not only being authentically human, but also being powerful is what these ideas are about. We can be who we are and still make a living.

Here are the adaptive shifts and new elements of this edition:

1. We can improve the power and connectedness of our virtual time together. Too often we have transported our prior meeting formats into the virtual gathering. Someone speaks. Announces the agenda by saying what is on a slide. As if we cannot read.

Instead of distancing ourselves by predictable agendas we can choose structures that accelerate connection in a virtual setting. How to design a meeting. Live or not. What used to be called a webinar. We can restrain the use of PowerPoint. Build relationships by designing the specific structure of what we can now call a High-Engagement Virtual Hour. This is about creating connections and trust for people who may never be in a room together.

2. We can broaden the venue for using your consulting skills to every place you care about. We thread throughout the steps and skills ways to redesign your contracting and discovery skills for use wherever you want build trust and make a place better. Your work in neighborhoods and towns, faith communities, social service organizations, public service, and education. We show how to bring relationship authenticity and directness into activism, into all activities you care about and want to have ways to be more powerful. This is all about reconstructing how we contract, discover, and push choice forward, regardless of the room or purpose of the room you are in.
3. The methodology, mostly expressed through questions, has been enhanced. Six partnership-building questions have been added to the menu. These questions can be used any time people gather. Bringing these practices into every meeting you go to will help produce energy instead of reducing it.
4. The language and behaviors that lead to impact have been simplified and enhanced. There are more pathways to get to the point in an accelerated, kind, and authentic way. We all know that building trust is essential; our promise here is to accelerate the build.

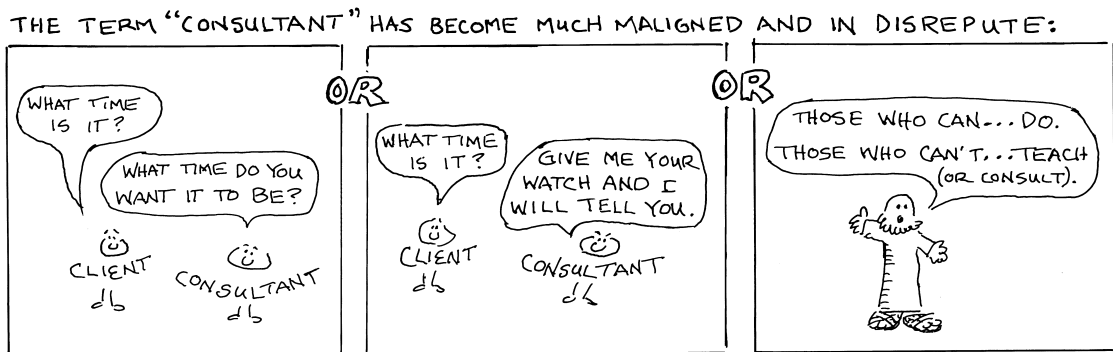
The times have rarely called with such urgency for ways to bring people together. Gaps among functions, levels, outsiders, strangers are only widened by our isolation. Covid was and maybe is a big pause. We have for centuries commodified human beings as replaceable objects. Our hope is that the Flawless Consulting ideas and practices can help end this isolation. One room or large gathering or community at a time.

“ . . . do we decide the questions at all? We decide the answers no doubt, but surely the questions decide us?”

— *Lewis Carroll*

CHAPTER 1

A Consultant by Any Other Name . . .



ANY FORM OF HUMOR has some truth in it. The truth in the prevailing skepticism about consultants is that the traditional consultant, internal or external, has tended to act solely as an agent of management: assuming the manager's role in either performing highly technical activities that a manager cannot do or performing unpopular activities such as reducing costs and people that a manager does not want to do. The most dramatic examples of consultants' taking the place of managers is when they identify people who will be let go or functions that will be eliminated. It goes by the term *restructuring*. The intent of this book is to give you options in responding with impact beyond your impact on the real pressures that are driving managers to the point of outsourcing what is very difficult. This is the value proposition of both internal and external consulting.

When you are asked directions and you tell someone to get off the bus two stops before you do, you are acting as a consultant. Every time you give advice to someone who is faced with a choice, you are consulting. When you don't have direct control over people and yet want them to listen to you and heed your advice, you are face-to-face with the consultant's dilemma. For some of you, this may be your full-time predicament. Some of you may face it only occasionally, functioning part time as managers (having direct control) and part time as consultants (wanting to influence but lacking authority to control).

Some Distinctions

A *consultant* is a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, an organization, or community but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. A *manager* is someone who has direct responsibility over the action. The moment you take direct responsibility, you are acting as a manager.

Most people in staff or support roles in organizations are really consultants, even if they don't officially call themselves consultants. Support people function in any organization by planning, recommending, assisting, or advising in such matters as these:

- Human resources or people,
- Information technology,
- Financial analysis,
- Auditing,
- Systems analysis,
- Market research,
- Product design,
- Long-range planning,
- Organizational effectiveness,
- Safety,
- Learning and development,
- Diversity equity and inclusion,
- Project management, and
- Many more.

The recipients of all this advice are called *clients*. Sometimes, the client is a single individual. Other times, the client may be a work group, a department, a whole

organization, or a neighborhood. The client is the person or persons whom the consultant wants to influence.*

In organizations, clients for the services provided by support people are called *line managers*. Line managers have to labor under the advice of support groups, whether they like it or not. But by definition, any support function has no direct authority over anything but its own time, its own internal staff, and the nature of the service it offers. This tension between the line manager (or client) who has direct control and the support person (or consultant) who does not have direct control is one of the central themes of this book.

The key to understanding the consultant role is to see the difference between a consultant and a manager.

Listen to Lynn:

“It was a great four-month project. I headed the team from administrative services that installed the new management information system. We assessed the problems, designed the system, and got Alice, the line manager, to let us install the system from top to bottom.”

Lynn is clearly very satisfied—but this is the line manager’s satisfaction. The team wasn’t really acting as a consultant; it took over a piece of the line manager’s job for four months.

This distinction is important. A consultant needs to function differently from a line manager—for the consultant’s own sake and for the learning goals of the client. It’s okay to have direct control—and most of us want it in various forms. It is essential, though, to be aware of the difference in the roles we are assuming as to when we have it and when we don’t.

Much of the disfavor associated with the term *consultant* comes from the actions of people who call themselves consultants but act as surrogate line managers. When you act on behalf of or in the place of the manager, you are acting as a surrogate manager. When the client says, “Complete this report for me,” “Hire this person for me,” “Design this system for me,” “Counsel this employee,” or “Figure out which jobs stay and

*You will mainly see the terms *consultant* and *client* used throughout the rest of this book to reinforce this belief and—especially if you are in a staff or support role—to assist your thinking of yourself as a consultant.

which jobs go,” the manager is asking for a surrogate. The attraction of the surrogate manager role is that at least for that one moment, you assume the manager’s power—but, in fact, you are doing the manager’s job, not yours.

Your goal or end-product in any consulting activity is some kind of change. Change comes in two varieties. At one level, we consult to create change in the line organization of a structural, policy, or procedural nature—for example, a new compensation package, a new reporting process, or a new safety program. The second kind of change is the end result that one person or many people in the line organization have learned something new. They may have learned what norms dominate their staff meetings, what they do to keep lower-level people in a highly dependent position in decision-making, how to involve people more directly in setting goals, or how to conduct better performance evaluations.

In its most general use, *consultation* describes any action you take with a system of which you are not a part. An interview with someone asking for help is a consulting act. A survey of problems, a training program, an evaluation, a study—all are consultations for the sake of change. The consultant’s objective is to engage in successful actions that result in people or organizations managing themselves differently and better living out their own intentions.

The terms *staff* or *support work* and *consulting work* are interchangeable, reflecting the belief that people in a support role need consulting skills to be effective—regardless of their field of technical expertise (finance, planning, engineering, personnel, systems, law). Every time you give advice to someone who is in the position to make the choice, you are consulting. For each of these moments of consultation, there are three kinds of skills you need to do a good job: technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills.

Here are the distinctions.

Technical Skills

Above all, we need to know what the person is talking about. We need expertise about the question. Either in college or in our first job, we were trained in a specific field or function. This might be engineering, sales, accounting, counseling, IT, or any of the thousands of other ways people make a living. This is our basic training. It is only later, after acquiring some technical expertise, that we start consulting. If we didn’t have some expertise, then people wouldn’t ask for our advice. The foundation for consulting skills is some expertise—whether it is scientific, such as coke particle sizing, or nonscientific, such as management or organizational development. This book assumes you have some area of expertise.

Interpersonal Skills

To function with people, we need to have some interpersonal skills, that is, some ability to put ideas into words, to listen, to give support, to disagree reasonably, to basically maintain a relationship. There are many books, therapists, and seminars available to help people with these human skills. In fact, there is a whole industry about achieving better relationships that is devoted to improving these skills. Just like technical skills, interpersonal skills are necessary to effective work, life, and even consultation.

Consulting Skills

Each consulting project, whether it lasts 10 minutes or 10 months, goes through 5 phases. The steps in each phase are sequential; if you skip one or assume it has been taken care of, you are headed for trouble. Skillful consulting is being competent in the execution of each of these steps. Successfully completing the business of each phase is the primary focus of this book.

Consulting Skills Preview

Here is an overview of what is involved in the five phases of consulting.

Phase 1: Entry and Contracting

This phase has to do with the initial contact with a client, perhaps a manager or executive, about the project. It includes setting up the first meeting as well as exploring the problem, whether the consultant is the right person to work on this issue, what the client's expectations are, what the consultant's expectations are, and how to get started. Contracting also occurs on a regular basis with ongoing relationships. Each time something shifts or is completed, a contracting discussion is needed. When consultants talk about their disasters, their conclusion is usually that the project was faulty in the initial contracting or re-contracting stage.

Phase 2: Discovery

Consultants need to come up with their own sense of both the problem and the strengths the client has. This may be the most useful thing we do. We also need skill in helping the client do the same. The questions here for the consultant are: Who is going

to be involved in defining the problem or situation? What methods will be used? What kind of data should be collected? How long will it take? Should the inquiry be done by the consultant or should it be done by the client?

Phase 3: Analysis and the Decision to Act

The inquiry and engagement must be organized and reported in some fashion. The consultant is always in the position of reducing large amounts of data to a manageable number of issues. There are also choices for the consultant to make on how to involve the client in the process of analyzing the information.

In giving feedback to an organization, there is always some resistance to the data, which is a sign we are dealing with important issues. The consultant must handle this resistance before an appropriate decision can be made about how to proceed. This phase is really what many people call strategy and planning. It includes setting ultimate goals for the project and selecting the best action steps leading to making the situation better.

Phase 4: Engagement and Implementation

This involves carrying out the planning of phase 3. In many cases, the implementation may fall entirely on the line organization. For larger change efforts, the consultant may be deeply involved. Some projects start implementation with an educational event. This could be a series of meetings to introduce some change, a single meeting to get different parts of the organization together to address a problem, or a training session. In these cases, the consultant is usually involved in rather complicated design work, and in running the meeting or training session.

Phase 5: Extension, Recycle, or Termination

Phase 5 is about learning from the whole process. This is the decision whether to extend the process to a larger segment of the organization or deeper into this group. Sometimes it is not until after some implementation occurs that a clear picture of the real problem emerges. In this case, the process recycles and a new contract needs to be discussed. If the implementation was either a huge success or a moderate-to-high failure, termination of further involvement on this project may be in the offing. There are many options for ending the relationship, and termination should be considered a legitimate and important part of the consultation. If done well, it can provide an

important learning experience for the client and the consultant, and also keep the door open for future work with the organization.



When you look at Figure 1.1, you will see a preview of some of the skills and topics covered for the events leading to engagement and implementation.

The Preliminary Events



Figure 1.1 An Overview of Consulting Skills

Consulting skills here are grouped into four phases: contracting, discovery, feedback, and decision. These are called the preliminary events in something being improved. They include the initial contacts, the planning meetings, the inquiry and analysis, and the feedback and decision-making meetings.

Engagement/implementation is when you finally do something with enough impact to be noticeable to many people in the organization, and they have the expectation that change, or learning, will occur because of that event. The preliminary events are, in many ways, more crucial for success than the engagement/implementation. An understanding of consulting skills therefore is really an understanding of preliminary events that are a necessary prelude to any real change.

The Promise of Flawless Consultation

One reason consulting can be frustrating is that you are continually managing lateral relationships. As a support person or consultant, you are working with a line manager in a context in which there is no clear boss-subordinate relationship between you. Vertical relationships are easier to understand. If your boss gives you an order, you know that he or she has the right to tell you what to do. But if your client makes a demand, you don't necessarily have to obey. The power balance in lateral relationships is always open to ambiguity—and to negotiation. When we get resistance from a client, sometimes we aren't sure whether to push harder or let go. This book is about managing this ambiguity.

Taken as a whole, this book is about flawless consultation—consulting as best we can, independent of the eventual outcome. It concentrates on the preliminary events because competence in contracting, discovery, and feedback creates the foundation for successful outcomes in the implementation stage. We have deliberately avoided discussing and demonstrating consulting skills in an overall step-wise sequence of chapters because some concepts and competencies must be brought to bear in every stage of a consulting relationship. So we have included chapters treating consulting assumptions, goals for a consulting relationship, and consultant role choices, as well as one on what flawless consulting means in practice, along with the chapters that specify and illustrate the skills required for each of the preliminary events. There are also interspersed chapters on such issues as client resistance and the special considerations of the internal consultant's role to demonstrate the belief that successful consulting demands more than a methodical, step-by-step application of technical expertise.

The promise is that if you consult in the way this book describes, your consultation can be flawless and you will:

Have your expertise better used,
Have your recommendations more frequently implemented,
Work in more of a partnership role with clients,
Avoid no-win consulting situations,
Develop internal commitment in your clients,
Receive support from your clients,
Increase the leverage you have with clients,
Establish more trusting relationships with clients, and
with whoever is important in your work.

The use of the term *flawless consulting* is presumptuous, but it is not accidental. A basic value underlying this book is that there is in each of us the possibility of perfection, independent of the outcomes in the world. There is a consulting professional inside each of us, and our task is to allow that flawless consultant to emerge. On its surface, this book is about methods and techniques. But each technique carries a consistent message more important than any method: that each act that expresses trust in ourselves and belief in the validity of our own experience is always the right path to follow. Each act that is manipulative or filled with pretense is always self-destructive.

Working in organizations means we are constantly bombarded by pressure to be strategic in relationships, to speak in an indirect way, and to ignore what we are experiencing at the moment. Flawless consulting offers the possibility of letting our behavior be consistent with our beliefs and feelings, and also to be successful in working with our clients. The focus in this book on techniques and skills in consulting is simply a way to identify the high self-trust choices we all have as we work in organizations and in communities. From the first day on our first job, each of us has struggled with the conflict between being ourselves and conforming to the expectations we think our employers or clients have of us. The desire to be successful can lead us into playing roles and adopting behaviors that are internally alien and represent some loss of ourselves. All of us question whether we can be ourselves and still make a living.

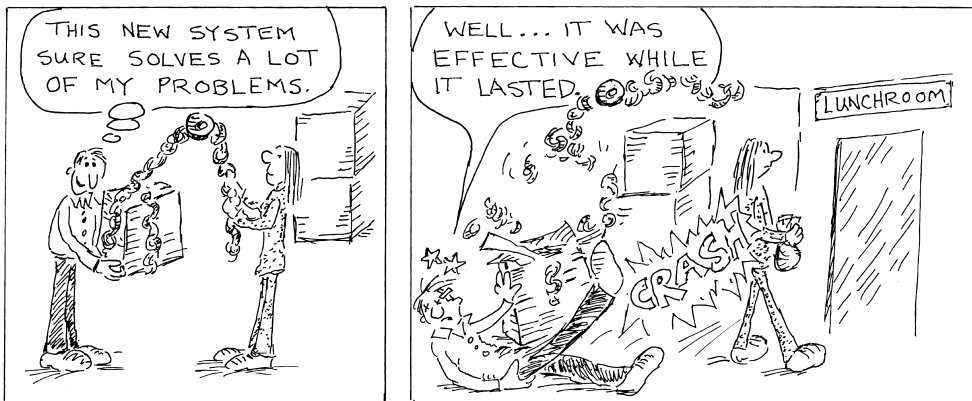
Consultants, internal and external, are especially vulnerable to this conflict because we are supposed to be serving our clients' needs. Our projects also tend to be short

term and quite specific, and we work at the pleasure of the client. It is easier to terminate a consultant or support person than to terminate a subordinate. In hard times, managers end consulting projects and reduce overhead costs before they reduce their own workforce. This sense of vulnerability can become a rationalization for consultants to deny our own needs and feelings and to not be authentic.

This book offers an alternative. It says that trusting ourselves is the path that serves us well with clients and increases the chances that our expertise will be used again and again.

PART 1

Fundamentals



CHAPTER 2

Techniques Are Not Enough

THERE ARE DIMENSIONS TO THE CONSULTING ROLE that transcend any specific methods we might employ and contribute to our effectiveness no matter what our technical expertise. A unique and beguiling aspect of doing consulting is that your own self is involved in the process to a much greater extent than if you were applying your expertise in some other way. Your reactions to a client, your feelings during discussions, your ability to solicit feedback from the client and give feedback to a client—all are important dimensions to consultation.

Roles Consultants Choose

Having leverage requires confronting the doubts at each stage of the consulting process—during contracting, discovery, analysis, and while preparing for the feedback meeting. Waiting until the implementation phase to overcome resistance is too late.

Ed Schein has identified three ways consultants work with line managers: in an expert role, a pair-of-hands role, or a collaborative role.* The choice depends on individual differences in management style, the nature of the task, and the consultant's own personal preference.

As you consult in a variety of situations, it helps to become aware of the role you typically assume and to be able to identify situations where this will help or hinder your

*These roles were first formulated by Ed Schein in the 1960s. He was one of the first to see the limitations of the expert role for consultants and opened the door to the collaborative potential in the helping process. His book *Process Consulting Revisited* (1998) more fully describes the power of process consultation as a vital capacity for those in a helping position. I strongly recommend that book and all of his books.

performance. Only then can you make a conscious choice among alternatives. One discovery that people often make in such self-analysis is that they begin to identify situations where they can operate more successfully in a collaborative mode. However, the realities of most organizations are such that there will be times when the pair-of-hands or expert roles are more appropriate and other times when they cannot be avoided.

Expert Role

One way line managers typically relate to support specialists, as well as to external consultants, is client-to-expert. Consumer-to-expert. The support person becomes the “expert” in the performance of a given task.

Example An organization’s new corporate benefits strategy was completely overhauled, and it has become clear that the website and online delivery has not lived up to expectations. The overall design is okay; the problem is somewhere in the navigation and the non-intuitive way employees have to input information to the site.

At this point, the manager calls in a staff website design specialist, describes the difficulties, and says to the designer, “I have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with this problem. You’re the expert; find out what’s wrong and fix it. You have a free hand to examine the whole system and do whatever analysis and fixing is necessary. Keep me posted on your findings and what you intend to do.” The website designer becomes, in effect, a member of the manager’s staff with delegated authority to plan and implement a program of change subject to the same restrictions as other members of the manager’s staff.

Here is what is happening in this kind of relationship:

The manager has elected to play an inactive role. A consumer. The client expects to hold the consultant, that is, the website designer, responsible for results. The designer-as-consultant accepts the responsibility and feels free to develop and implement action plans. The manager is expected to provide the resources and the assistance needed to solve the problem.

Decisions on how to proceed are made by the consultant on the basis of specialized expert judgment. There is no need to involve the manager in technical details.

The consultant gathers the information needed for problem analysis and decides what methods of data collection and analysis to use.

Technical control rests with the consultant. Disagreement is not likely because it would be difficult for the manager to challenge “expert” reasoning. If the manager seeks to exert control over technical decisions, the consultant will see it as unjustified interference.

In this situation, collaboration is not required because the problem-solving efforts are based on specialized procedures.

Two-way communication here is limited. The consultant initiates and the client responds. The consultant expects and is expected to initiate communication in a question-and-answer mode. The consultant plans and carries out the engagement or implementation or provides detailed instructions for implementation by the manager, whose role is to judge and evaluate after the fact.

The consultant’s goal in this example is to solve the immediate problem. Neither the manager nor the consultant expects the manager to develop skills to solve similar problems in the future.

Oops Internal consultants especially are well aware of the problems involved in operating in the role of expert. Here are two big ones.

First, consider the consultant’s ability to make an accurate assessment. Given a problem that seems to be of a purely technical nature, the consultant can use technical expertise to isolate the problem and develop a solution. But problems that are purely technical are rare. Most problems have a human element in them, and if the prevailing organizational climate is fear, insecurity, or mistrust, people may withhold or distort essential information on the human part of the problem. Without valid data, accurate assessment becomes impossible. Action programs based on faulty discovery have little chance for success.

Second, consider the commitment of people to take the recommended actions. Studies done by outside experts seldom carry the kind of personal ownership and commitment needed to deal with difficult management issues.

Pair-of-Hands Role

Here, the manager sees the consultant as an extra pair of hands. The manager says, in effect, “I have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with this problem. I have examined the deficiencies and have prepared an outline of what needs to be done. I want you to get it done as soon as possible.” The manager retains full control.

The consultant is expected to apply specialized knowledge to implement action plans toward the achievement of goals that the manager has defined.

Here are some of the clues that the consultant is acting as a pair of hands:

The consultant takes a passive role. The order of the day is responding to the manager's requests, and the consultant does not question the manager's action plans.

The manager makes the decisions on how to proceed. The consultant may prepare recommendations for the manager's review, but approval rests with the manager.

The manager selects the methods for discovery and analysis. The consultant may do the actual data collection, but only in accordance with procedures that the manager has outlined.

Control rests with the manager. The consultant is expected to make suggestions, but avoids disagreement because it would be seen as a challenge to the manager's authority.

Collaboration is not really necessary. The manager feels that it is his or her responsibility to specify goals and procedures. The consultant can ask questions for clarification.

Two-way communication is limited. The manager initiates, and the consultant responds.

The manager initiates in a descriptive or evaluative mode.

The manager specifies change procedures for the consultant to implement.

The manager's role is to judge and evaluate from a close distance.

The consultant's goal is to make the system more effective by the application of specialized knowledge.

Problems The major problem emerges in the discovery phase. In a pair-of-hands role, the consultant is dependent on the manager's ability to understand what is happening and to develop an effective action plan. If the manager's assessment is faulty, the action plan won't work, and the consultant who provided the service becomes a convenient scapegoat.

To avoid this trap, the consultant may ask for time to verify the manager's assessment. And then the consultant might face another problem: managers who have a preference for consultants who take on the pair-of-hands role may interpret such requests as questioning their experience, their authority, or both. Once you bend over, it is hard to stand up.

Collaborative Role

Consultants who assume a collaborative role enter the relationship with the client with the notion that management issues can be dealt with effectively only by joining their specialized knowledge with the manager's knowledge of the organization. Problem-solving