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Outside Consultants: When, Who, and How to Use Them

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Outside consultants are often considered luxuries. This is understandable. Budgets, in real dollars, have generally declined, while low-cost expertise has become easier to obtain. There are more and better POD publications and conferences, and increased networking among POD members. ERIC/CIJE can be accessed via CD-ROM, a vast improvement in user-friendliness. And the American Association of Higher Education has devoted recent conferences and publications to instructional development.

Yet anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that the right consultant used at the right time and in the right way can yield not only large program benefits, but increased funding many times in excess of the consultant's fee. In the largest study to date of faculty development's effectiveness, Eble & Mc Keachie (1985) evaluated programs at 33 Midwestern colleges and universities and found that one of the factors common to successful faculty development programs was the use of outside consultants.

That's not to say that consultants are always useful. For example, most of us have heard horror stories about consultants who descend upon a campus with a pre-packaged program, and a few days later, dance off with a fat fee, leaving behind an alienated staff and an unsolved problem.

This article will address the following questions:

- 1) How does a faculty developer know when a consultant is needed?
- 2) How does one find the right consultant?
- 3) How does one ensure maximum benefit at minimum cost?

How Do You Know When You Need A Consultant?

MYTH: Only hire a consultant when you need highly specialized expertise or if disaster is impending.

There are at least five other times when even the most successful faculty development program can benefit greatly from an outside consultant: before initiating a new program, when effectiveness is hampered by interpersonal difficulties, when effectiveness is hampered by budget problems, when in-house personnel don't have time to do needed work, or when a more objective viewpoint is needed.

1. Before initiating a new program.

In a conventional approach, a faculty development director might supplement his or her own knowledge about a planned innovation (for example, a workshop on "Teaching as a Performing Art") by reading and by talking with an expert or two. Then, before implementing the innovation, the director might survey the intended program participants to gain their input and buy-in.

Too often, such a procedure doesn't work. For example, the director of instructional development at a small Catholic college wanted to institute a department chair training program. He met individually with each chair (practical at a small college) to gain input into the proposed training. Three chairs volunteered to participate in the first cohort. The training was set to begin.

Unfortunately, the instructional developer failed to ask the deans and chairs a crucial question: "How did they feel about *his* being the trainer?" (Subconsciously, he didn't want to raise this question because he wanted to be the trainer—it would be a visible way to demonstrate his value to the college.) Even had he asked, the chairs may not have been candid.

At the last moment, the instructional developer decided to bring in a consultant "just to be safe." The consultant phoned a half-dozen department chairs, and most of them told the consultant they were reluctant to participate because they didn't want to receive training from a faculty developer. They wanted training by a team of respected department chairs. The program would have had two strikes against it before the first pitch was thrown. The consultant recommended that the instructional developer convene a meeting of the participating department chairs to identify acceptable trainers.

The consultant also helped the instructional developer by suggesting some content for the training (e.g., time-savers for department chairs). More importantly, he helped with an often overlooked key to program success:

marketing. The best program in the world still needs marketing, on the front end to obtain participants and perhaps financial support, and on the back end to expand the program beyond the pilot phase, to institutionalize the innovation, and to ensure that the faculty developer gets due recognition for the program's success. The latter is crucial when it is time to renegotiate the instructional development budget.

In sum, when a new program is contemplated, even if the faculty/instructional developer believes he or she has the content expertise to implement it, and even if it is a small program, an outside consultant, brought in for a short time can mean the difference between embarrassment and success. In the case described above, the consultation was done entirely by phone for a total cost of \$1500.

2. When effectiveness is hampered by interpersonal difficulties.

Within and between many units at an institution, negative feelings accumulate and rarely get communicated to the offending party, at least not in a constructive way. An outside consultant, if perceived by all parties as fair, interested only in making all their lives happier and more successful, can be a conduit for the negativity. Having heard it all, the good consultant can, in collaboration with all concerned, bring the problems into the open and develop plans to ameliorate them.

For example, while attending a conference the director of the faculty development center at a prestigious Eastern university mentioned to a consultant that something was not quite right at the center. Slipups in work quality were a bit too frequent and the "vibes" around the office were slightly tense. Things were still okay, but seemed to be moving in the wrong direction.

The consultant spent two days talking with each employee at the center, one-on-one, in small groups, and finally by chairing a "town meeting" of all the employees to develop an action plan for improvement. (See page 106 for a copy of that action plan.)

A relatively small consultant fee, some tinkering with the feedback loops, transferring one staff member, and greater efforts to enhance friendliness around the office, led to a permanent improvement in the productivity and job satisfaction of everyone on the six-person staff.

3. When budget problems are hampering effectiveness.

Recommending the use of a consultant in this situation may surprise some readers because when money is short an outside consultant seems like

a luxury. But if the person is selected carefully and used properly, the consultant's fee can be an investment that pays big dividends in increased funding.

For example, the faculty development center at a mid-sized Midwestern state university had been suffering with no-increase budgets for the last three years. Meanwhile, expenses had increased as had the demand for services. The director, although only on 75% time, was working 50-hour weeks. Understandably, program quality had begun to suffer.

Each request by the director for additional funding was met with polite refusal. Colleges and universities usually have the money for what they want to spend it on. The problem was that the vice president for academic affairs perceived that neither he nor the university was receiving enough benefit for the dollar. Therefore, he chose to spend discretionary funds on such faculty favorites as travel grants and sabbaticals.

Working closely with the director of faculty development, the outside consultant developed a plan for increasing the visibility of benefits to the university, and just as importantly, the benefits to the academic vice president and other power hitters at the university. For example, the labor-intensive and low-visibility individualized counseling of faculty was temporarily reduced to create time to develop a high-visibility retreat for deans and department chairs. The academic vice president was encouraged to be involved in planning the event, and the faculty development director took pains to ensure that the deans and department chairs were fully aware that the vice president deserved much of the credit for the retreat.

This faculty development center started receiving annual budget increases, which over the following three years totaled \$26,000. The consultant did all the work long-distance (see below) for a total cost of \$1700.

4. When in-house staff doesn't have time to do vital work.

For example, a Southern regional state university had just appointed a new president. Starting with his inauguration speech, he made it clear that first priority would be to crank up the institution's research productivity. He fired the provost, a teaching-oriented person, and replaced her with a former academic vice president at a Carnegie I research institution.

This spelled trouble for the faculty developer and her one-person shop. To reduce the potential for the disemboweling of her budget or even her position, the faculty developer would have liked to initiate programs to help faculty to become more productive researchers: for example, workshops on grant writing, writer's block, and how to do research on teaching. The problem was that the faculty developer's time was fully taken by other

projects on which she had already invested considerable time. It was too late to make major changes for this school year.

The solution was an outside consultant. The faculty developer was out of money, but convinced the new provost, the dean of the school of agriculture, and a few department chairs to contribute a small sum of money to hire a consultant to develop, with input from the faculty developer and the financial backers, a three-year plan for improving faculty research productivity, which would be implemented beginning the following September.

Using the consultant not only enabled the faculty developer to accomplish what she didn't have time to accomplish, but also added a cachet to the plan for enhancing the faculty's research productivity. This cachet increased the university's perception of the plan's value, and indirectly, the faculty developer's value. The investment in a consultant increased the likelihood that she will remain central to faculty development at the institution.

5. When a more objective viewpoint is needed.

For example, a faculty development director might want an outside perspective on the program: How good is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? An external review can offer a big morale boost while heading off problems that are still solvable.

Also, an outside consultant's objectivity can be valuable when a faculty developer is negotiating next year's budget. No matter how compelling a faculty developer's arguments for funding his or her program, they may be seen as self-serving and biased. But bring in an outside consultant to assess the cost-effectiveness of the program, and the credibility of the request increases. Of course, this should be done only if the faculty developer is confident that the program is, in fact, cost-effective.

How Do You Find the Right Consultant?

MYTH: You should choose the person with the most content expertise, the one with the "biggest name."

Content is often not the core problem. It is psychologically easiest to justify hiring a consultant by saying, "We need more content expertise." But content expertise can often be acquired at no cost within the institution, from written materials, a CD-ROM search of ERIC/CIJE, or a quick phone call to a colleague or two at another institution.

Even if a consultant is needed to provide content, the "biggest name" may not necessarily be the smartest choice. There is a difference between knowledge and the ability to transfer that knowledge. If I were looking for a

piano teacher of classical music, I wouldn't necessarily hire Van Cliburn, even if I could afford him. His knowledge may be so second nature, so advanced, that he might be unable to communicate what I need—the basics—clearly and patiently.

A “big name” also often brings another liability: the attitude that he or she has *the* answers. The “big name” consultant may or may not have the answers, but that attitude will certainly inhibit the sense of ownership that most clients and their staff need to help implement changes.

An even bigger liability of many “big names” is that they often have acquired their “name” because they are widely published in prestigious journals. Such journals primarily publish theoretical articles and rarely publish practical articles, and practical solutions are precisely what one needs when hiring a consultant. Gil, Lucchesi, et al (1983) echo this concern. They found that private consultants tend to be more practically oriented; that university personnel, in general, are more interested in arriving at broadly generalizable ideal solutions; while the need, when retaining a consultant, is to arrive at specific and practical solutions.

Even top content experts who communicate that content well, and who are good at generating practical solutions, are unlikely to achieve maximal effectiveness unless they are also expert in understanding interpersonal dynamics and the way power is distributed and acquired at colleges and universities. Usually, the complete solution requires taking politics and interpersonal dynamics into account.

The best consultants may be those who have a knack for coming up with practical solutions, who possess moderate content knowledge (They know enough to provide needed expertise, yet they're less likely to convey the sense they have *the* answers.), who speak and write clearly, and who are skilled change agents. Good change agents understand the complex dynamics occurring among faculty developers, faculty, resources, and administrators. They have the ability to ask the right questions and to engender trust from people they have just met.

How to identify an excellent consultant:

1. Is the person a full-time consultant? Full-timers will have more experience as change agents than university employees who do consultation as a sideline. Gil, Lucchesi, et al (1983) have found that full-time consultants are less likely than university professors or administrators to have other responsibilities that will interfere with the consultant's ability to complete the work on time.

2. How good are the consultant's recommendations from former clients? In choosing a consultant, recommendations may merit more weight than an

impressive vita. An excellent vita offers no guarantee of one's ability as a change agent.

3. What are the consultant's previous final reports like? Don't be impressed by physical weight. Too often, the utility of a report is inversely proportional to its heft. And a thick report will cost you more than a thin one. The best reports are usually brief, with specific, practical, clearly explained recommendations. A consultant's report usually also summarizes the process undertaken to develop the recommendations. Does this process make sense to you?

4. What can you infer about the consultant from an initial discussion? Does the consultant seem to have a knack for generating practical ideas quickly? How clear are his or her explanations? Does the consultant seem to possess adequate content knowledge? How enthusiastic is the consultant? How much attention does the consultant pay to the interpersonal and political factors that may be affecting the situation? Does the consultant have the sort of personality that would engender trust from those just meeting him or her?

How Do You Ensure Maximum Benefit at Minimum Cost?

MYTH: Because consultants are expensive, they only are feasible for big projects.

Often, the most cost-effective way to use a consultant, even for some large projects, is long-distance: using phone, fax, modem, teleconferencing, E-mail, and mail. In paying by the hour rather than by the day, with no airfare and land expenses, one may be able to afford a consultant even for small projects.

Many clients believe that to help with an ongoing program, the consultant must observe the program first-hand: "The consultant needs to see how it's working." In truth, because the consultant can usually spend only a short time observing a program in action, an on-site observation is likely to yield little valid information. Because personal observations, no matter how brief, tend to create strong impressions, a site visit often causes a consultant to base his or her judgments on a sketchy observation rather than on more valid information. It is usually better for the consultant to assess the program's strengths and weaknesses by interviewing and surveying program implementers, supervisors, and participants, and by assessing participant outcomes, much or all of which can be done long-distance.

When adapted to the individual circumstance, the following model for long-distance use of a consultant can often yield maximum benefit for minimum cost.

1. Before the initial phone call, define with care the problem to be addressed by the consultant.

A common error is to call the consultant without having taken adequate time to define the problem(s) the consultant is to address. This definition usually takes more effort than many clients think, even when the problem seems obvious. For example, if a faculty development office has been charged with developing a new writing-across-the-curriculum training program, it might want a consultant to help plan it. But that is too general a description of the problem.

Clients are miles ahead if they can identify their specific needs. Do they need help in selecting appropriate training vehicles? In designing the training itself? In selling faculty on it? In convincing administration that more money is needed? In developing a project evaluation? In working with a particularly difficult and/or particularly powerful person on campus? Usually, it is wise for clients to speak with representatives from all constituencies likely to be affected before attempting to develop a description of the problem. By making a best attempt at defining the questions to be addressed *before* calling the consultant, clients can save much money: the consultant won't waste time working on nonessentials and going down blind alleys.

Attempting to define the problem before contacting the consultant also helps ensure that the consultant doesn't mold the problem definition to suit his or her strengths and biases rather than to meet the needs of the client.

2. The initial phone call focuses on refining the definition of the problem(s) to be addressed and on identifying the information needed to develop a solution.

The client should begin by presenting the problem(s) defined in Step 1. The good consultant then helps to refine the problem definition. For example, to ensure that the problems presented are not merely symptoms of deeper problems, the consultant should ask questions such as, "What led you to decide that this program was needed?" and "Assuming the program was implemented as you envision it, might a residual problem remain?"

It is appropriate that for the first part of the discussion a consultant not charge the client a fee, because this period should be viewed as a tryout, an

opportunity for both parties to assess if they can work well together. The consultant must make clear at what point there will be a fee.

The next task in the discussion is to agree on what information must be gathered in order that effective solutions can be developed, and who should gather it. Much money is wasted when consultants collect information that could more inexpensively be collected in-house. For example, prior to developing a program to enhance faculty skills in working with non-white students, a consultant and the client jointly developed a needs assessment questionnaire regarding multicultural issues. Once the questionnaire was developed, the client rather than the consultant assumed the time-consuming tasks of producing and distributing the questionnaire, the follow-up letters and phone calls to increase response rate, and the tabulation of results. This saved the client thousands of dollars in consultant fees.

The consultant should be asked to collect information only when necessary: for example, when one requires opinions from faculty, administrators, and staff that they might not share candidly with the client.

The consultant or client should draft a contract which includes a work and payment schedule and a description of the activities and products the consultant is to provide. Sample contracts can be found in Gil, Lucchesi, et al (1983).

3. The information is collected and used to develop the first draft of an action plan.

The information gathered by the client is sent to the consultant. The consultant melds this information with any that he or she has collected.

Long-distance consultants enjoy benefits over on-site consultants in that they have the resources of their office at hand, and often those of a major university. For example, the multicultural needs assessment revealed that faculty wanted help in dealing with underprepared students. One math professor wrote, "Many of my minority students are doing poorly in my calculus classes. If I take class time to continually reteach concepts to these students, I feel I'm being unfair to the other students—we won't cover the material they need to move on to the next course. If, on the other hand, I don't take the time, and merely ask low-performing students to go to the tutoring center, I feel that I'm being rigid. I need help in dealing with this problem."

Because the consultant was working long-distance, he was able to review the literature on mixed-achievement classes using materials at his office plus those at U.C.-Berkeley's Education-Psychology library before drafting an action plan. The consultant also had the benefit of time. Over a two-week period, he visited the library twice, called a dean at the client's

college, spoke with an expert on ability grouping at the Rand Corporation, and met with a high school teacher known to be expert at teaching mixed-ability classes. Perhaps most importantly, the consultant had time to ponder the results of all this data collection. The consultant who must do all the work on-site often feels pressure to come up with a prescription right away.

4. The first-draft action plan is presented in a teleconference attended by all affected constituencies.

The effective consultant emphasizes that the first-draft action plan is a synthesis of the ideas presented by all parties, and that the purpose of the teleconference is for participants to recommend changes, including, if appropriate, major ones.

For instance, recall the earlier example in which the consultant recommended increasing high-visibility activities such as a retreat for deans and chairs. One teleconference participant suggested that the retreat would have greater focus and more lasting impact if participants were to produce a tangible product during the retreat. Another participant then suggested that a suitable product would be a department chair handbook that “would actually be useful.”

5. The action plan is revised and implemented.

The consultant revises the recommendations in light of the teleconference and writes a *brief* final report. Money can be saved by asking that the consultant wnotw write the standard long final report, in which all the history and supporting data are presented. Typically, much of this information is already known to the affected populations, is rarely read, and serves more to provide tangible evidence of the consultant’s efforts than to benefit the program.

Often, the report should consist of little more than the recommendations and their rationale, and an action plan for implementation that includes a timetable. Sometimes a report can be even simpler and yet extremely valuable. Here is the full report written after an on-site visitation to the faculty development center at a prestigious Eastern university that was suffering from intra-office communication difficulties.*

*The client granted permission to reproduce this report. The names and some details were changed to preserve anonymity.

Dear Amy,

Here is a summary of the ideas that were generated during my visit.

Although I've said this to you before, I want to stress that I believe that your faculty development center is already very good, and the recommendations below are simply designed to make an excellent center even better. I also want to reemphasize that most of the recommendations were generated by you and your talented staff. This ability to generate good ideas from within is just one more example of your center's quality.

In the interest of brevity, I will list the recommendations without the rationale behind them. I've shared the rationales with you and your staff. Of course, if anything is not self-explanatory, please phone me.

- **SHIFT SOME SUPERVISION OF STAFF FROM YOU TO HARVEY.** To reduce your overburdensome workload and capitalize on Harvey's strengths, Harvey would assume primary responsibility for dispensing day-to-day feedback to staff and answering their questions. You would, however, maintain your open-door policy so that anyone who wanted to speak with you could do so. You would also meet with each staff member quarterly to provide clear feedback on strengths and areas for growth. You and the staff member should collaboratively develop an action plan for ameliorating each area for growth.

I did not sufficiently stress this while on campus, but staff needs to know that they, not just you and Harvey, must be clearer in asking and giving feedback. This is easier said than done, but it's a goal worth shooting for.

- **SHIFT RESPONSIBILITY FROM YOU TO HARVEY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS.**

- **ANNUAL PLANNING CALENDAR.** A large, attractive calendar might be hung in the central work area. All staff would be asked to note all anticipated absences, OID events, even staff birthdays and other fun occasions.

- **INFORMAL HUDDLING.** As appropriate, all staff might consider informal pow-wows with one or more other staff members. Harvey has expressed a personal interest in initiating more of these, but all staff might be encouraged to do so.

- **WHO GETS WHICH OFFICE?** All staff (except Amy and Harvey) might individually think about what office space might best meet their needs. Then the staff should meet to divide the space so that the greatest overall good is achieved.

- **MARILYN MIGHT ASSUME MORE WRITING RESPONSIBILITIES.** *If it is felt that her workload is already too heavy, you might consider utilizing a work-study student to answer phones so Marilyn would have more time to write.*
- **REGARDING DARRELL.** *I've suggested to him that he needs to come to you (or Harvey?) for a new assignment when he completes a task rather than going on to work on some lower-priority activity. He also has been advised that he might want to monitor himself a bit more closely to ensure that his comments at meetings (e.g., at the faculty council) are not overzealous. It will be interesting to see if, with occasional reminders, he improves.*
- **A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO ALL-STAFF INVOLVEMENT WHERE POSSIBLE.** *e.g., picnics, TGIF get-togethers, etc.*

POSSIBLE AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- **IS THE MEDIA CENTER FUNCTIONING OPTIMALLY?** *The media center is a large unit under the faculty development center's jurisdiction, so the quality of the media center's services significantly impacts the faculty development center's overall functioning and reputation.*
- **A VIDEOCAMERA/INTERACTIVE VIDEO-BASED TRAINING PROGRAM FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS.**

Harvey and I discussed this a bit, and he asked me to provide the name of a leading firm utilizing this technology. It is Performax, Inc. of Westport, CT.

- **POSSIBLE FRONT-BURNER INITIATIVES.** *The meeting with the senior faculty underscored your belief that emeriti programs and writer's block workshops might be moved to the front burner. As Barbara's husband pointed out, it may be important to get Dr. Wilens involved early if the writer's block workshops are to have maximal impact.*

As you pointed out, this may be an ideal time for new initiatives. You're renovating your offices, there will be personnel changes, and you are beginning to develop a plan for the center's second era—a plan designed to ensure that it remains one of the nation's preeminent faculty development centers and one with even greater impact on faculty, staff, and students. I wish you well.

Sincerely,

Two years later, the client reports that she continues to glance back at this report as a refresher. She said that if the report were longer, it probably would be gathering dust.

5a. Follow-up.

Although follow-up could have been included within Step 5, it is so important and so often omitted that it demands separate mention. Many a wonderful action plan has failed to be fully implemented or to stay fully implemented. For example, many innovations fade away because they don't become institutionalized; that is, they don't obtain permanent funding, staffing, or demand for service. An action plan that includes follow-up can reduce the risk of these problems. For example, here is the action plan for the department chair/dean retreat.

1. A step-by-step strategy for planning the retreat. Each step listed the responsible *office* (not the responsible person, because a person may leave or become too busy). It also included a deadline for each step. A sub-plan was written for obtaining funding for the retreat.

2. A plan for evaluating the retreat, both to provide guidelines for improvement, and if successful, to provide evidence of that success which could be used to obtain subsequent funding.

3. A plan for making the retreat an annual affair if it was successful. This plan for institutionalizing the retreat included a list of the office assigned permanent responsibility for planning the event, a timeline-based procedure for planning the retreat each year, and a plan for obtaining hard money to fund it annually. (In this case, the University Foundation agreed to fund it pending review of the first retreat's evaluation.)

Some readers might wonder if it is a waste of time to develop the plan for institutionalizing an innovation before knowing if it is worth institutionalizing. But if planners know that there is a practical way to ensure that the innovation will be permanent, they seem to make extra effort to ensure that the first attempt is as successful as possible. The time it takes to develop the plan for institutionalization is usually small relative to the benefit.

In sum, most action plans should include follow-up: concrete steps (with deadlines) for implementing the innovation, evaluating it, and institutionalizing it.

On-site Consultation

There are instances in which a site visit is necessary. For example, extensive face-to-face interactions are important when many persons are involved, when a program must be observed in action, or when problems of interpersonal relations are complex and central to solutions.

No single approach will suit all circumstances, but the following model for a two-day on-site consultation has proven very beneficial and cost-effective in a surprisingly wide range of situations.

Before The Visit

1. If the consultant is a good public speaker, you may save a large proportion of the cost. Contact someone on campus who might like to have him or her speak: provost, alumni director, student services director, director of admissions, etc., and ask if there is interest in him or her giving a talk for a fraction of his or her normal rate. You're already having to pay travel expenses, and since the consultant will already be on campus, he or she may charge little additional to make an address. Yet, you can reasonably ask the sponsor of the speech to fund a significant portion of the consultant's costs.

2. If the consultant is coming from afar, try to schedule the consultant's visit to begin on a Monday and ask if he or she wouldn't mind arriving on Saturday night to relax and tour the area on Sunday. Agree to pay the consultant's land expenses for the day. Airfares are dramatically lower if one stays over a Saturday night, so if the consultant's does so, you'll usually save hundreds of dollars, even after you've deducted the cost of the extra land expenses. Additionally, the consultant will begin on Monday well rested.

3. Agree on a tentative agenda a few days before the visit. This is close enough to the visit date that the consultant is likely to have given serious thought to how he or she would like to proceed, yet early enough that you have time to make sure that all parties with whom the consultant might want to speak will be available. Give the consultant a list of the times each person will be available to meet.

The Visit

4. The consultant and key players meet briefly, one-on-one. Group meetings, especially those including the boss, can inhibit candor.

5. As the consultant learns more about the situation, he or she may schedule meetings with other individuals.

6. In light of what the consultant has learned, he or she brings together groups of 2-4 of the people above to discuss what they revealed and what the consultant has inferred. Where appropriate, confidentiality is maintained.

7. At the end of the first day, the consultant drafts a deliberately premature set of recommendations—as a way of concretizing his or her thinking, and providing the client and other key players with something concrete to which they may react. This helps the consultant to refine assumptions and recommendations.

8. The consultant begins the second day by meeting with individuals and small groups to discuss the premature recommendations that apply to them. They revise and often transform the premature recommendations into draft recommendations.

9. After these meetings, usually around 2 P.M., the consultant hides away for an hour or two to synthesize all this input into a first draft list of recommendations and commendations.

10. Late in the afternoon, the consultant convenes a "town-meeting" of all concerned. During the first few minutes, the consultant presents the first draft list of commendations and recommendations. Then, the participants provide input into changing the first draft recommendations into penultimate draft recommendations. The consultant serves as facilitator. After all the penultimate draft recommendations have been agreed upon, the town-meeting participants develop an action plan for implementing each recommendation. The consultant concludes by summarizing this draft of an action plan, and the town meeting ends when all agree that it is a reasonable first draft.

11. The client hosts a reception immediately following the town meeting. For a relatively small cost, this not only builds collegiality, but adds import and ceremony to the consultant's visit which increases the likelihood that the action plan will be taken seriously.

Indeed, a major benefit of an on-site consultation is ceremonial. When an outside consultant is brought in to address a problem, everyone knows the problem is being taken seriously, and it marks a new beginning, a chance to erase the past and move into a new era.

12. The consultant leaves and as soon as possible (while the client and others' interest remains high), puts the action plan in writing including a draft plan for evaluating and, if appropriate, institutionalizing program changes.

13. Upon receipt of the action plan, the client distributes it to all affected parties, requesting their suggestions for changes.

14. The final action plan is written by the client, reflecting the input of all concerned. Thus, ownership ends up not with the consultant, but where it should be: with the client and affected parties.

Summary

An outside consultant can be a powerful ally in improving program quality if the following practices are followed:

1. Key opportunities for the use of a consultant are recognized: e.g., a long-distance consultant can be cost-effective even for a small program.

2. In selecting a consultant, skill as a change agent and in generating practical ideas are weighed at least as heavily as expertise in a content area.

3. Strategies are used to alleviate the major disadvantage of consultants, their cost:

- a) Prior to contacting the consultant, thorough efforts are made to identify the root problem(s), not just the symptoms. A lack of content knowledge can often be addressed without a consultant, using print resources and colleagues.
- b) Where possible, the client, not the consultant, gathers the information needed to develop an action plan.
- c) Where possible, long-distance consulting is used: fax, modem, E-Mail, teleconferencing, phone, and mail.
- d) A specific plan for follow-up is developed to assess implementation and, if appropriate, institutionalization of changes.

Conclusion

Robert Townsend, former head of Avis, once described a consultant as "Someone who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is." Yet, if carefully chosen and used, consultants are not merely useless luxuries: they are essential. They are essential because they can improve program quality, which in turn can result in increased program funding far in excess of the consultant's fee. Perhaps more importantly, good consultants revitalize. They restore enthusiasm, idealism, and passion. What could be more important?

References

- Eble, K. & McKeachie, W. (1985). *Improving undergraduate education through faculty development*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Gil, E., Lucchesi, E., Tauber, G., & Onderdonk, D. (1983). *Working with consultants*. Chicago: American Planning Association. (Report No. 378).
- While written for urban and regional planners, this monograph will be useful to faculty developers, especially those contemplating retaining a consultant for a large project that will require multi-level approval. The monograph offers a practical, step-by-step procedure for selecting a consultant using a formal RFP process. It also includes sample contracts and good advice on how to manage the consultant and your staff while the consultancy is in progress.
- Holtz, H. (1985). *Utilizing consultants successfully: A guide for management in business, government, the arts, and the professions*. Westport, CT: Congressional Information Service.
- Primarily aimed at business leaders, this volume offers particularly good sections on how to figure out ways a consultant can be of help, and how to define the parameters of the problem the consultant should address.