

A checklist: What can management consultants offer?

Your job is delivering on strategy. No one said you had to deliver alone. Sometimes you will need assistance: every situation will be different and only you can make a judgement call as to whether and when to bring in consultants.

We've been called in to all sorts of arrangements to assist. As an executive, Maura used consultants to work alongside her in developing many—but by no means all—of the strategies that she delivered.

If you do want assistance, it's good to think through what they might be able to offer. Here is a checklist.

- ✓ Arms and legs—having enough staff to redeploy at the right time can be a significant barrier, so Maura's primary reason for bringing in management consultants in the past has been to boost the level of work that she could deliver. This can extend to specific components of strategy formulation, such as having discussions with people and broader scale community engagement, where a lot happens in a short space of time.
- ✓ A perception of independence—this sometimes translates to arm's length authority and can be used to good effect with sceptical or hostile stakeholders but also to good effect when you would like to demonstrate the seriousness with which you view the opinions of others. They can (sometimes) sidestep internal politics and make assertions for which internal staff would be criticised. And let me be blunt: sometimes independent consultants provide political cover for decisions likely to be unpopular.
- ✓ Experience—while a more subtle knowledge is usually held in people who work with issues every day, consultants have been exposed to a variety of businesses and have earned experience from others they have worked with.
- ✓ Disciplinary specialist expertise—you may have internal experts, but often they are not available or just plain busy in the timelines you are talking about, so expertise in, for example, modelling, research, cost-benefit analysis as well as many other areas can be helpful.
- ✓ Discipline—tight project management is an important part of getting projects delivered on time and budget. Consultants have to account for how they spend their time, and so they tend to be more disciplined than internal staff in getting work done within the agreed timeframes.
- ✓ A perspective outside the hierarchy—this is helpful when dealing with areas where there is a strong sense of hierarchy (meaning sometimes others will respond more positively than to those in the hierarchy but perceived as junior)
- ✓ A supply of bright, often young people who are willing to do whatever it takes—this is important for situations where the best staff are already allocated to other projects or where staff will think work beneath them, or where you just can't hire enough bright people because they all go elsewhere.

- ✓ A fresh perspective—sometimes it is possible to just get stuck, for example when it isn't clear what the problem is, or where the obvious solutions seem unpalatable, or where different approaches have been tried and not work. And in addition, our own preconceptions can get in the way of us seeing better ways of approaching an issue. It can be useful to have a perspective different from those caught up in the process or orthodox view.