

Preface

I SET OUT TO WRITE this book in order to describe my experience serving as a strategy consultant to healthcare organizations. Many years ago, a colleague, Roger Witalis, shared with me a story about his father, who had run a successful medical practice. When his father retired, all the confidential notes and medical records of his patients ended up in a garbage bag in his garage. I became determined to capture some of what I've learned as a management consultant in a different way.

Early in my career, I faced a choice: I could go the established direction of anyone who had earned a master's degree in hospital administration, or I could take a more unusual path and become a career consultant. I knew I could live a comfortable life as a healthcare executive, yet for some reason—and to the surprise of more than a few people—something drove me to take “the road less traveled.” On reflection, I think my decision was, in part, motivated by my firsthand experience with some of the pervasive political challenges that permeate healthcare at virtually all levels.

What followed was a career in strategy consulting to healthcare organizations. I moved 2,300 miles from Phoenix, Arizona, back to Washington, DC, where I had gone to graduate school and had a support group, to launch my solo consulting practice—National Health Advisors, Inc. With that, the adventure began, and I never looked back—until now.

This is not intended as a how-to book, though I do describe many best practices in some detail.¹ In *Flawless Consulting*, his well-known how-to book on consulting, Peter Block writes, “An authentic consultant is not an oxymoron, but a compelling competitive advantage, if unfortunately, a rare one.” My intent is to write about the *experience* of management consulting, with an emphasis on

1. There are various ways to acquire the requisite skills or learn how to start a consulting practice. See, for example, Consulting.com and the extensive resources available at One Page Business Plan (www.onepagebusinessplan.com), which was founded by the late Jim Horan. I have not tried to replicate these resources.

authenticity. My understanding of the nature of authenticity relies in part on Jim Gilmore and Joe Pine's *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Whereas Gilmore and Pine (2007) focus on authenticity in the business context of an economic offering (e.g., a product or service), I focus instead on authenticity as an individual or interpersonal trait. Authenticity is essential to becoming an exceptional consultant.

In consulting, there is the formal, didactic portion that most people might identify, and then there is the less formal “stuff” that really matters. This is an attempt to focus more on the stuff. Specifically, I set out to

- dispel some of the myths about consulting,
- address the intense demands of consulting,
- focus on some of the nuances specific to management consulting,
- examine the all-important client–consultant relationship from different perspectives,
- help to separate what is important from what is less so,
- discuss some practices common to the best management consultants,
- profile aspects of the healthcare industry that tend to be the focus of consulting services,
- share some of the interesting history of consulting to a relatively young industry like healthcare, and
- analyze some of the learnings from my experiences as a career strategy consultant.

I have divided the book into three parts. The first focuses on the individual experience of consulting, the second on the experience of working at a consulting firm, and the third on best practices for both individuals and firms:

1. **Part I: The Individual Experience.** What is important to know about consulting and how it works? Consulting has both allure and problems associated with it. The value proposition of consulting is critical to understand, notably as it applies to healthcare. Consulting takes different forms and approaches. It is important to understand motivations for becoming a consultant and how these might be positioned from a career perspective. Consultants require a basic set of tools. It is not easy being a consultant, and there is a difference between one who has received formal training and one who has not. Among the requirements to do consulting well is the ability to understand the client perspective. Consultants must also be able to differentiate between a client's perspective and their own.

2. **Part II: The Firm Experience.** How are firms similar or different? Firms take on different forms, which have important implications. There are some interesting surveys of the “best consulting firms.” Any consulting firm, regardless of size, must perform an array of basic functions if it is to be sustainable. A few firms are described in each key category to illustrate how they differ. Which firm is right for you is an individual choice that can be based on a variety of relevant criteria.
3. **Part III: Exceptional Consulting.** What are the best practices of the best consultants and firms? Exceptional consulting involves numerous critical success factors, some of which are common sense and others that are quite nuanced. Among the most important is managing the client relationship and the details in such an effective way that it might lead to additional work or a solid referral. Some of the most valued lessons are shared from more than 40 years of healthcare strategy consulting. Consulting to healthcare organizations has a rich history and offers both a fascinating area of focus and a great opportunity for future growth. Residual emotions always seem to be involved in moving on from an existing client, and they need to be carefully managed.

Although this book is meant to be read front-to-back, it is written in such a way that each chapter can stand on its own. I invite readers to begin anywhere and jump around as desired.

REFERENCE

Gilmore, J. H., and B. J. Pine II. 2007. *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.