

*Ray Dravesky is director of employee communication, for Adelphia Communications, the fifth- largest cable company in the United States. He started his career in consulting with Towers Perrin, and moved over to the corporate side about a decade ago. His e-mail is ray.dravesky@adelphia.com.*

*Liz Guthridge is managing consultant of Connect Consulting Group, which is her own firm. She started her career in employee communication with Amoco (now BP), and then switched to consulting. Her e-mail is liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com. Ray and Liz worked together at Towers Perrin. They've frequently collaborated as client and consultant.*

# How clients and consultants should work together in this century

*Two experienced communicators respond to the Murray/D'Aprix debate about consulting. They provide a compelling vision for the future of the client/consultant relationship: better working relationships and greater mutual respect.*

In response to *JECM's* discussion by Roger D'Aprix and David Murray in the January/February 2005 issue on consultants justifying their fees, we'd like to offer what we consider some important and timely additions to the conversation. We understand it's a spirited conversation, where our profession's experts "agree to disagree," and that point is not lost on us. However, the discussion carried some very important points about which the authors of this article feel strongly.

Namely, let's bury bashing between consultants and clients. It's so last

century. And while we're at it, let's also get rid of the outmoded ways we work together. Stash 'em in a time capsule if you can't break loose. While each point of view in the prior January/February article may have some valid points, it's time for some fresh thinking on the subject and to reframe the conversation.

Today's times call for new ways to work together, a new business model if you will. The foundation for this new "client/consultant model" is made up of two basic building blocks: **better working relationships** and **greater mutual respect**. Nothing shocking, but all too often they are absent or in short supply. It seems to us that the earlier article only touched on these concepts, and that hit a raw nerve with both of us.

Supporting these blocks are new assumptions and work habits that acknowledge our work world has changed dramatically and continues to evolve. See "10 Reasons Why the Client/Consultant Dynamic Has Changed" and Table 1 with the new assumptions.

We recognize that our call to action is not going to eliminate all the complaining about clients and consultants. But we do hope to reframe the debate so we can collaborate more constructively. Improved collaboration should lead to better results, which should also bring about improved credibility with the leaders in our organizations.

## Why better working relationships

Having better working relationships means acknowledging that these are personal relationships. You don't have to go on vacation or share your deep and darkest secrets with your client or consultant. But you'd better have a knack for getting to know each other as individuals, not just as a means to an end. This involves developing and keeping relations for more than the few weeks or months of the project you're working on together. Otherwise, you will not succeed either internally or externally in business.

From the client's perspective, too often after the assignment is done, the consultant has disappeared. There are no follow-up phone calls or e-mails checking in to assess how things are going, much less asking for formal feedback. The client might get a call when the consultant needs a reference, or is scrambling to make a sales goal with his/her consulting firm's latest, greatest product.

From the consultant's perspective, consultants need to recognize that the playing field is crowded, and unless something dramatic happens, there will continue to be an oversupply of consultants sitting on the bench waiting to go

into the game. So one of the best ways to differentiate yourself is to bring both ability and affability to the client situation. Being affable also means being authentic; you can't be someone you're not. But you also can show that you're a real person and not a machine, and your client relationships are important to you—they're a form of currency.

Both clients and consultants also need to remember that those young kids you once delegated work to grow up quickly. They're managing budgets and resources and can influence the scope of projects, including selecting the consultants to involve. You can bet they remember how they were treated, and who's got the fresh ideas and good cultural fit. Far too many people on both sides don't get this.

## **Why greater mutual respect**

We need each other. You have to involve others or you will not succeed, no matter which side you're on.

From the client's perspective, it shouldn't be a sign of weakness for a client to say "I need help." With leaner staffs, greater workloads and limited budgets, clients are pushed and pulled in multiple directions these days. It's hard to find time to think, much less juggle dozens of requests that are almost all time-sensitive. Consultants need to understand that the one or two projects they're helping the client with represent a fraction of the client's workload. Also, the client may be working with several consultants, all wanting the client's attention and all convinced that they're the premier consultant on board. The consultant has multiple clients. Why shouldn't the client have multiple consultants?

From the consultant's perspective, it shouldn't be a sign of superiority to think that clients need help with the basics, along with the complex problems. Instead, during the contracting process, they need to ask specific questions to define what role the client wants them to play. Is it adviser? Diagnostic? Strategist? Implementer? Combo? Something else?

And if this role doesn't fit the consultant or isn't what the consultant wants to do, the consultant needs to walk away, preferably suggesting some alternative resources. If it looks like a good fit, the consultant needs to then ask for the resources and support that he or she believes will be needed for the situation. This also involves raising difficult issues. If the consultant either feels desperate to take the job or so intimidated by the client, then this is a client/consultant disaster waiting to happen. Both sides need to feel comfortable contracting with

one another, both at the beginning of the working relationship and throughout.

Fees are a large part of the working relationship, and clients and consultants need to develop a shared understanding of what to expect. For example, clients who pay a premium to work with the large consulting firms assume that they'll get high quality in return. Yet, there are plenty of incidents of missed deadlines, reports and proposals with other clients' names and data, and unreturned phone calls and e-mails. And don't forget the big firm consultants who only have time for the C-suite executives rather than the individuals who are running the project. These and other breaches—subtle or obvious—can indeed sully the reputation of all consultants, not just those of the big firms.

Clients who work with independent consultants may not experience the same level of poor quality and service relative to the lower fees; in fact, the quality and service may be as good or better than what the large firms provide. That's not surprising considering all the experienced consultants who've left the big firms to hang out their own shingles. But it doesn't mean the independent consultants are always the top performers, especially if their business is inadequately funded or supported, or they don't have an outlet for venting about all their small business challenges.

## **Talking candidly without angst and bashing**

Because we're dependent on each other, we've got to respect each other. That means having open, honest conversations about work from the start and throughout. Clients need to be candid about their reasons for bringing in consultants, guide the consultant through any minefields, and provide the level of resources needed to do the job. Consultants need to keep in check their hubris, be rigorous about both what they do and how they do it, and be willing to broach the difficult issues, rather than avoid them.

Respect can then lead to trust on both sides, which is critical for strong working relationships. Not surprisingly, bashing is an out-of-bounds behavior if we're to respect and trust each other.

## **10 reasons why the client/consultant dynamic has changed**

- 1.** The lines between consultant and client are getting fuzzier. If you think you're a client and not a consultant, you're wrong. And vice versa. Client organizations are increasingly becoming known more as process- and policy-oriented and often are unable to effectively support other business units as needed. This has led to a push for consulting skills training for internal resources. And increasingly, consultants are outsourcing work to freelancers, so they're winding up being the client.
- 2.** Global connectivity, competitiveness and complexity affect both consultants and clients, too. With global connectivity and competitiveness, it's possible for buyers of communication services (both internal and external) to purchase communication services at world-standard prices (not U.S. prices) anywhere in the world on a moment's notice. We need to work independently and together to ensure we understand and can work in the complex environment and add value—namely, achieving outcomes that drive the business in the direction it's heading.
- 3.** Bulk is out. Peripheral vision is out. Clients no longer are asking their consultants for more people, services, offices, countries. They want different perspectives, sound thinking and greater flexibility, among other things.
- 4.** Big budgets evaporated with the dot.com implosion. Micro payments, maybe not as small as the 99-cent songs people download from iTunes, are becoming the more popular way to transact business.
- 5.** With technology and almost instant communication, consultants and clients can easily share ideas, documents and files, and both parties can contribute to them. The creative process becomes truly collaborative with both adding value—except for those consultants who believe they have to convert all their basic reports into Acrobat PDF files.
- 6.** Time remains the scarcest resource. Who has time to write – or read – long,

complicated reports? Get to the point. At Adelphia, we half-joke that “if it needs a staple, it’s too long.” We want the bottom line, and fast. If we want the backup, we’ll ask for it. We don’t pay by the page or word. And who has time to write and read long reports? Who wants to endure meetings longer than 90 minutes? Client or consultant, we’ve always got to ask ourselves what’s the most efficient way to do something without hurting the buy-in process or harming quality.

7. On the subject of time, do billable hours provide any value to the client or the consultant? It’s as if the client is subsidizing the consultant to work slower, dumber and wastefully. Instead, clients should be more willing to forget about hours and instead pay for projects, especially those that are high-quality, are quickly delivered, customized and provide an immediate return.
8. One-size-fits-all remains a great goal until you have to wear the thing. In today’s complex world, do you really think one consulting firm can offer all the expertise a client will ever need? At the quality the client needs? And at the price the client is willing to pay? Besides requiring custom solutions, clients generally need relationships with multiple consultants.
9. Big egos deserve pity, not acceptance. Who’s got the energy to try to placate the *prima donnas* of the communication world, whether they’re internal or external? And do those big egos really deliver consistently high ROI?
10. Do we really want to write and read any more articles about client/consultant angst? All of us have better things to do. Let’s move on to the next big issue.

Late 20th Century Assumptions/Work Habits	Early 21st Century Assumptions/ Work Habits	Implications of the Change
<p><b>The client was gatekeeper.</b> Main client controlled access to all client contacts, and seldom encouraged contact with consultant except in meetings. Client also keeps all consultants at arms' length.</p>	<p><b>The client serves as orchestra leader.</b> Main client now introduces consultant to all the members of the client team, and encourages direct access. Client also expects all the consultants working with the company to collaborate.</p>	<p><b>The client needs to trust the consultant to play well with others.</b> Consultants must build good working relations with multiple client contacts and other consultants who are involved. There's no room for the egotistical consultant who says, "I can't say anything because my competitors are in the room."</p>
<p><b>The client was above his/her head and needed help.</b> Consultants thought clients called them in to solve problems that were beyond the clients' expertise. They didn't have the knowledge, skills or experience. Clients typically needed an expert or an extra pair of hands, and often both.</p>	<p><b>The client calls in consultants for a variety of reasons.</b> Many clients these days are perfectly capable of solving challenging problems. They call in consultants because they need more brainpower, some specialized expertise, more bandwidth (what would have been an extra pair of hands last century), a different perspective, confidential help or whatever.</p>	<p><b>The client and consultant collaborate.</b> The work is more of an iterative process with client and consultant working shoulder to shoulder. Rather than deliver lengthy formal reports, the consultant prepares succinct drafts that the client reviews and may edit. The work represents the best of both.</p>
<p><b>The client was always right.</b> Even though the consultant often thought the client may be in over his/her head, the consultant tended to be deferential to the client regarding the work. The consultant often tried to offer up advice but if the client didn't bite, the consultant resorted to becoming an order taker and carrying out the client's request.</p>	<p><b>Client and consultant enjoy a healthy give and take.</b> Consultants should continue to be deferential to their clients, but they also need to push back and challenge their client on important issues. This is the key way for consultants to keep their integrity and continue to offer objective counsel.</p>	<p><b>The consultant is a business partner, not a hired hand.</b> The consultant needs to act as an independent business partner, and not the client's extended staff, a pushover or a difficult <i>prima donna</i>. This means being aware of the business relationship and acting responsibly around contracting for assignments, conducting objective assessments and diagnoses, requesting feedback and taking appropriate actions.</p>

<b>Late 20th Century Assumptions/Work Habits</b>	<b>Early 21st Century Assumptions/ Work Habits</b>	<b>Implications of the Change</b>
<p><b>The client needed consultant because consultant has the access to information.</b> Unless the client had a huge budget and lots of resources to fund research, the client turned to the consultant to provide all sorts of useful information, such as survey results, benchmarking data, best practices and other information that may be proprietary.</p>	<p><b>Everyone has access to information.</b> If you've got a computer and an Internet connection, you have a lot of information at your fingertips, whether you're a client or a consultant. Both can Google equally well.</p>	<p><b>The balance of power around information has shifted.</b> The client no longer depends on the consultant for routine information requests. In fact, clients can provide consultants with useful nuggets of information and serve as a sounding board. Clients turn to consultants to use their knowledge to interpret and apply the information in the public domain. And consultants can still do specialized research studies.</p>
<p><b>Consultant proximity was almost a failsafe guarantee to keep a client and get more work.</b> The consultant stayed close to the client, not only doing as many projects as possible but also serving in a project manager role to stay close and connected.</p>	<p><b>The consultant must constantly provide value if he/she expects to be invited back.</b> Clients now tend to evaluate their return on investment after each project. They make sure the consultant delivered the results the client needed, and did so in a timely, cost-effective way.</p>	<p><b>Consultants must always question their value and replenish their tool box.</b> Successful consultants must always stretch. If they stay in their comfort zone, rest on their laurels and don't challenge themselves or their work, they will find themselves getting stale and falling into traps in today's dynamic business world.</p>