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## **Meet the MasterMinds: *Flawless Consulting* with Peter Block**

For more than two decades, Peter Block has been writing and talking about how consultants can provide service and accountability to organizations and communities. His books include the classic, ***Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used, Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest*** and ***The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters***.

Block is a partner in [Designed Learning](#), a training company that offers workshops to build the skills outlined in his books. He has published more than sixty articles on organizational change and building productive communities, and he helped found The School for Managing & Leading Change.

In this interview, Block describes the power of the authentic consultant, discusses why organizational change often fails and offers his best advice to new consultants.

### **MCNews: You've written about the authentic consultant. What are the traits of an authentic consultant?**

**Block:** The behavioral part is pretty clear, and is essential to flawless consulting. Authentic behavior is simply the willingness to be who you are and to tell the truth. **This** is the consultant's most powerful tool for building client trust and commitment. Many consultants try to be too clever in communicating with their clients, seeking to convince clients to their point of view.

Clients see right through the fast language and persuasion techniques and, as a result, their level of skepticism rises. Instead, consultants should be who they are and tell the truth in a caring way, which will establish the balance that leads to a trusting, productive relationship with the client.

Care, honesty, depth, and saying no to commercialism as your major goal are qualities that can change the world. To be authentic, consultants must bring those qualities into their practices.

These are personal qualities that count, but they aren't enough. Another important trait of the authentic consultant has to do with purpose. Consultants must take a stance as to what they want to help create. My services become authentic in the effort to create authentic institutions. And, out of that comes accountability.

Of course, you have to struggle with the tension between healing the ills of the world and earning a living. I think many consultants really want to be helpful, but they also get caught up in growing a business. **The commercialization of care is the core paradox and crisis of consultation.**

### **MCNews: How do you think consulting has changed over the years?**

**Block:** I think that, over the years, the large consulting firms have become so imprisoned by their size and their ambitions that they have become more a reflection of their clients rather than a catalyst to change their clients. In large part, this is due to the fact that many consultants have become surrogate managers.

Instead of being purely advisory, they focus on implementing processes or technologies, because that's where the money is. They say, don't worry about that function, we will take it over. And this blurs the line between consultant and client. At that point, to be authentic you would have to stop calling yourself a consultant.

Instead, you are a manager, the boss. It's hard to see clearly or tell the truth in that situation. Consultants need some marginality to give effective advice. I think what matters is the extent to which we confront our clients with their freedom, with their choices. When you become part of a system, it's very hard to do that because of economics and politics.

It reminds me of this doctor I would visit once a year. For nine years, his human touch was enough. Then one year, he said, I think we should do some additional testing. I asked if he had found something, and he said, no, nothing has changed; it's just that we have this machine now, and I've got an opening on Monday morning. I felt like he had invested in a machine and discovered that its utilization wasn't returning his investment, so I was going to be tested whether I needed it or not.

Consulting firms have also made investments on which they now need a return. Consultants have taken over management functions mostly because it's great business and provides that return.

### **MCNews: Do you think consultants are making any progress toward authenticity?**

**Block:** Good people are good people; it doesn't matter where they are. The large, control-driven firms have spectacular people in them, many of whom are very authentic human beings. But the practice has changed. It has gotten so profitable and has grown so large that the nature of the business has changed: it has become an industry.

I would say that consulting is no more authentic than it was twenty years ago because there is almost no accountability. We have seen huge investments in consulting, and a lot of what we called consulting, was really just new technology, new business processes.

And, when these projects don't work, it seems to have no impact on the industry at all. It's like saying, look I have a process I want to install in your company, and we have a seventy-five percent failure rate. That is, seventy-five percent of the time it does not deliver on its promise. Do you want to do it? And, the client says, absolutely, let's go. What is that about? I get more interested in the motivations of the buyer than the seller.

### **MCNews: Do you see a growing skepticism about the value of consultants?**

**Block:** There has always been skepticism and cynicism about the integrity of consultants. I remember writing about it in 1978. I don't know that consultants are any less effective than they ever were.

Consciousness about consulting has increased since it's become such a big business. But, clients are always going to be sensitive about bringing in consultants to tell them what they think they already know, or to implement what they don't have the courage to do. Human beings just tend to be reluctant to accept help or admit their vulnerability.

**MCNews: What can individual consultants do to overcome the skepticism they face from clients?**

**Block:** Take the client's side. They have doubts and reservations about you; agree with them. Say, you are right, half of the consulting work that's done probably never should be done. There is no answer to skepticism. The most affirming thing you can do is support the integrity of the client's concerns. You can do everything in your power to make this time different, but you can't promise them.

For one thing, you don't have complete control because it's a fifty-fifty deal. That's another reason why the customer model—I'm a supplier and the client is the customer—doesn't work very well. Consulting is more of a partnership.

**MCNews: You have made the point that the ways consultants go about creating change actually create defenses against change. Why does this happen, and why do clients put up with it?**

**Block:** Clients put up with it because it affirms their belief systems. Many people have an economist's view of the human spirit: they think people will only pursue their own narrow self-interest; if change is required for the sake of something larger than the individual, or some active altruism is required, nobody is going to do it.

With such assumptions, you begin to convince yourself that to get the change you need, you've got to drive it, drill it down, and create a burning platform. Listen to the language. It has an element of violence. Consultants adopt that language as a saleable stance and say they will help the client drive change. It all begins with one question from clients, which is, "how do we change those people?"

As soon as you begin with that question, the coercion has begun. So unless you stop at that moment and say, well that kind of mindset only creates more of the illness we came to heal, then you are caught in that mentality. You start having strategy meetings about how to change people, get them on the same page, or get them on board, which is a great phrase. I want to ask, what makes you think you're not in the water too?

I don't seek projects that are about how to change other people. I don't mind if that's where the client is, but that is not my goal. The essential answer to "how do we change those people?" is, "what are you doing to create the world about which you are complaining?"

But, it doesn't surprise me that clients want the coercion approach from consultants because, usually, it lets the client off the hook. Those are the strategies of empire. What's so funny is that sometimes that approach does work in the short run.

**MCNews: Often, clients want to get things done right away and pressure consultants about how to solve a problem fast. How can consultants avoid the trap of jumping to solutions too early in a project, but still serve their clients?**

**Block:** I once heard that a therapist is good for you until you hit that therapist's blind spot, and then you've got to find another one. What is the blind spot of consultants that matches the blind spot of clients? A lot of consultants love speed and pace. They want to demonstrate value by being quick and practical. They want to get it done without a lot of theoretical baloney. The consultant's get-it-done attitude maps nicely with client interests to get a problem solved quickly and economically, but neither helps change anything that matters.

To resist jumping to the "how" of solutions, consultants must ask themselves if they have done the work of valuing thought, reflection, depth, and dialog as tools for change. Some consultants

have a methodology, model, or a process they want to bring to the world. If they can apply that model or process, that's fine. But, they should still ask themselves those questions.

The other question for consultants gets back to purpose: What are you there for? I have always liked the idea that I am there to help the client make a good decision. Half the time that decision is **not** to go ahead with a project. Then I have to come to terms with my own economic needs, my own life style. But I know I've done what I believe is right for the client.

**MCNews: If you could offer advice to a new consultant, what would it be?**

**Block:** First, you have to learn how to manage your anxiety. For the first five years, you look out three months in your calendar, and all you see is empty days. You have to get used to that.

Another piece of advice I would give is to narrow your focus. Don't try to be the all-purpose consultant. Find out what you care most about and what you have a gift for, and let the world know about that.

Third, do your own inner work. **You** are the product, so do whatever it takes. And, recognize that you can't do it alone. You need to get help yourself, whether it's from a teacher at a weekend workshop, a church, or a therapy group. You need to draw on a community you are part of, whether you call it spiritual, therapy or twelve-step, it doesn't matter. Otherwise you can get hubris and arrogance, which are occupational hazards.

Getting back to anxiety, consultants live on the margin and security is something you will never really have. But, even our clients are terrified. Why do clients support poor consulting? I think the answer is that people are just afraid. The higher up you go, the more fear there is.

It's the denial of fear that is the problem. I think fear and anxiety may be our natural state, but people try to pretend they are not afraid. Life is scary. So, face that instead of trying to act confident.

**MCNews: Last question: what are you reading these days?**

**Block:** Well, I'm reading *The Colonizer and the Colonized* by Albert Memmi. I am fascinated by it because that is how I see institutional life, as kind of a colonizing process. An author that I love is Ivan Illich, who wrote *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*. John McKnight, who wrote *The Careless Society*, is a wonderful author.

These authors are all talking about our work. I don't think you can learn about your profession by reading about it from the inside. I believe you have to go outside your profession and find people who talk about it in a new language.

I am stunned by anybody who thinks in a unique way. After all, the purpose of reading is to change your mind.

**MCNews: Thanks for talking to us today.**

Find out more about Peter Block, his books and services at [www.PeterBlock.com](http://www.PeterBlock.com) and at [Designed Learning](#).