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Meet the MasterMinds: Jerry Weinberg Reveals a Few Secrets of Consulting

For more than 40 years, Jerry Weinberg has worked on transforming client organizations. He is author or co-author of many articles and more than 25 books, including, *The Secrets of Consulting*, *More Secrets of Consulting, Are Your Lights on?*, and *Becoming a Technical Leader*. Weinberg has worked for IBM and Project Mercury, and he has taught at Columbia University and the University of Nebraska.

MCNews asked Weinberg to let us in on some of the secrets of effective consulting.

MCNews: As a longtime observer of the consulting industry, how have you seen it change over the past several years?

Weinberg: Clients are becoming more sophisticated when searching for consultants. They ask better questions and look for actionable recommendations with measurable results. They are not so concerned about getting the lowest priced consultant.

On the other hand, some clients are less sophisticated. I've noticed new companies entering the market looking for consultants as a way of reducing full-time staff by hiring expertise only when they (think they) need it. They are often focused on the wrong problem, looking for the lowest price, and don't know how to work well with consultants.

Both types of clients present challenges; you'd better know which one you're dealing with before you get in too deep.

MCNews: Trust is at the center of strong client relationships. What do you do to create and sustain trusting relationships with your clients?

Weinberg: First and foremost, I'm forever honest and open, but never (intentionally) cruel when delivering information. I respect all confidences, and refuse to take confidences that I will not be able to respect. I try to be a decent human being and treat everyone as if they are too, regardless of what others have told me. I also work on a money-back guarantee, so I won't take money from a client who feels I didn't deliver as promised.

MCNews: You've said that the most important act in consulting is setting the right fee. What's your perspective on consulting fees?

Weinberg: First—as I said above—I don't take money if I don't deliver what I promised.

Second, I make sure that my client understands my fees up front, and I try to keep my fee structure simple so that it's not difficult to comprehend.

Third, I use the principle of indifference: I set my fee so that if I lose the work, I won't be devastated, or if I get the work, I won't feel I undercut myself.

Fourth, I'm always willing to discuss my fees with a client who has questions, and always willing to show the value of my work in quantitative terms so clients can understand the return on their investment in me.

MCNews: Is there a relationship between a consultant's fee and his/her ability to influence the client to implement the consultant's suggested actions?

Weinberg: Well, of course. First of all, if they don't pay you, they won't believe you. I've found this true, for example, when I've done pro bono work with charitable organizations. So I always make them "pay," though not with money.

Second, willingness to pay tells you something about how ready they are to try something different. Of course, some clients are willing to pay a lot of money to say, "See, we hired an expensive consultant and he couldn't solve this problem, so what do you expect from us?"

So, there's definitely a relationship, but it's not a simple linear one. The fee is always a factor.

MCNews: You've suggested that consultants can become a powerful force in clients' organizations, and that the "powerful consultant" can be both desirable and dangerous. How is it dangerous and what can consultants do to guard against the danger?

Weinberg: You become dangerous just when your wish comes true: clients do what you say without questioning it. Nobody is that smart, and if you think you are, then get out of the consulting business before you kill somebody.

You can guard against that danger by insisting that your clients investigate your suggestions and make their own decisions in a way that forces them to take responsibility for them. You are selling advice, not responsibility for decisions. Of course, you are responsible for giving the best advice you can, but not for playing God.

MCNews: Many clients resist the changes recommended by consultants. Any tips for helping consultants overcome that resistance?

Weinberg: Yes. Don't. "Overcoming" is not what you want to do with so-called resistance. What you're calling "resistance" is what it looks like to you when your clients don't feel safe following your suggestions. So, what you want to do is learn from it—it's a gold mine of information, as long as you don't push to "overcome" it.

An effective consultant will follow the "resistance" to the information that shows what's wrong with the suggestion, or how it's framed, or what more clients need to put it into action.

MCNews: If you could give a new consultant one piece of advice, what would it be?

Weinberg: Stop believing that some single, general, magical piece of advice can really help anybody—you or your clients. Effective consulting requires personal preparation, lots of work understanding your client's needs and capabilities, numerous little "experiments" to learn how they respond to change, and follow-up and follow-through to complete each intervention. So, is that one piece of advice, or many?

Your readers can learn more about these topics from my books. Even better, they can come to the Amplify Your Effectiveness (AYE) Conference November 7-10, 2004, in Phoenix, Arizona, and learn directly from me and a number of my most effective consulting colleagues <http://www.ayeconference.com>.

MCNews: Thanks for the tips.

Find out more about Jerry Weinberg at www.geraldmweinberg.com.