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**Meet the MasterMinds: *The Seven Cs of Consulting* with Mick Cope**

Mick Cope is a consultant, author, and a musician. His books include: ***Leading the Organisation to Learn; Know Your Value? Value What You Know; Float You: How to Capitalize on Your Talent; Lead Yourself: Be Where Others Will Follow*** and ***The Seven Cs of Consulting: Your Complete Blueprint for any Consultancy Assignment***.

Cope is the founder of the consulting company WizOz. He has been a consultant for many years in the field of business transformation. His clients include BT, Consignia, Zurich Financial Services, Unilever and the BBC.

MCNews talked to Cope about how the Seven Cs can provide a framework for excellence in consulting.

**MCNews: What motivated you to write *The Seven Cs of Consulting*?**

**Cope:** When I went out on my own in consulting after working for a large firm for twenty-four years, I realized that, to sell myself, I would have to be more articulate in explaining to clients how I managed the lifecycle of consulting engagements. I also realized that, like many consultants, I was consulting tacitly: I did what I did because it worked.

I couldn't find a book that adequately explained where you start with a consulting engagement, what you do, how you finish and the tools you use along the way. So, I decided to write one, and I did it through reflecting on what worked for me, talking to people and doing some academic research to come up with a framework for the consulting process.

I'm actually updating the book now and some of the tools will change from the earlier edition, but the Seven Cs will remain because I think all engagements must go through the seven stages—client, clarify, create, change, confirm, continue and close, even if you call them something else. So the book is about providing a lifecycle model for consulting engagements.

Also, it was driven by complete and utter frustration at the failure rate for change initiatives. Up to 80% of change engagements fail to deliver the anticipated benefits and, as a result, consultants have a terrible name. And, corporate scandals like Enron have not helped. The Seven Cs model aims to improve the professionalism of consultants in what we present to clients about what we do and how we do it.

Consultants aren't so good at that because they rely on their "black box" of tricks like doctors do. When you go to doctors, they prod and poke you and you may understand what they have done, but you don't know how they got there.

**MCNews: Does it seem to you that clients have much less tolerance for that black box, and that the consulting process needs to be transparent now?**

**Cope:** Absolutely, and the Seven Cs model provides that transparency so the consultant can say to the client, look this is the approach we are going to take, and the client can challenge the consultant. For me, the important thing is to have a conversational bridge between the client and the consultant.

**MCNews: Given how comprehensive the book is, what is the best way for consultants to use it?**

**Cope:** Not by reading it end to end. It's a tool kit that's designed so consultants can dip in and find what they need to help them. There is a tear-out card at the back of the book that is like a roadmap of the Seven Cs, which is easy to keep in your briefcase. If you reach a stumbling point on an engagement, you can use that roadmap to figure out what you need to be doing and if there is anything in the book to help you think about that.

**MCNews: One of the Seven Cs is about the client-consultant relationship. How do you build a strong relationship with a client?**

**Cope:** The two disciplines I follow are to challenge and educate. In working with clients, my first role is to challenge their presuppositions, and help them realize that what they think are truths may be constructs they've built up because they are in crisis or because they have always done things a certain way.

The second thing is the consultant's role as educator, the importance of which is woefully underestimated. I use the Seven Cs as an educational tool to challenge clients to think differently about how they see a problem and about how we are going to address it. Hopefully, this builds trust and helps the client to really understand the notion of discernable change, which is the underlying purpose of the Seven Cs—to create something that's going to last and not just be a short-term, quick-fix solution.

**MCNews: You also talk about need to clarify, to understand the client's real issues. How do you balance the need to clarify with the client's need to get on with it and get the job done?**

**Cope:** In many ways, I don't see it as a balance, and this is where I fall out with a lot of consultants. Too often there is this rush to change. The client pressures the consultant to get to the change stage and fix the problem as quickly as possible.

Consultants may want to do the job properly, but they also have the pressure of that 75% utilization target from their senior partner, and they want to get to the change phase so they can bill the client. So, there is a shared paradigm of let's get this fixed quick.

But, I believe this is what leads to the 80% failure rate, because you are building on sand. If you don't clarify the problems properly, how on earth can you develop a solution that's going to be valued and sustainable? Going back to the doctor analogy, the doctor can prescribe a solution based on what looks to be wrong with a patient. But unless the solution is based on a robust and rigorous diagnostic exercise, the patient will be back in three or six months with the same problem. At that point, the doctor's name will be mud, and the patient will have told ten people how bad the doctor is.

You end up with massive brand erosion, and that's what's happened in consulting over the past decade because we have fallen into that race for change. It's quite simple for me: if the client isn't prepared to spend time in client clarification, then I won't work with them.

**MCNews: You take them through that diagnostic stage no matter what?**

**Cope:** That's right. Here's another analogy. In the UK at the moment there is a serious shortage of tradesmen, plumbers and good builders, for example. You get two types here, the cowboys and the real tradesmen, the experts. Now, let's say I have a plumbing problem, and I tell the plumber, I want you to do this to fix it. The cowboy says, okay fine, he does it and takes my money and runs. The tradesman, because he is proud of his craft, will say, I value what you as a client believe, but I have to look into this plumbing system and understand it, otherwise whatever I fix is going to fail later.

What I am advocating is for consultants to have some of the discipline and pride of a good tradesman, and not just race for the money or be too ready to accept the client's diagnosis.

In my classes, I tell students to run a search on the Internet using two words: consultant and joke. If you do that, the jokes just stream out at you. We have done this to ourselves because we don't stop to clarify what's really going on with the client.

**MCNews: Let's talk about the next stage, creating solutions with the client. What can consultants do to push clients beyond the inertia of what's been done before, to help them take some risks in their thinking about solutions?**

**Cope:** I would ask the client to consider the last five major change programs the company has done, and tell me how many of them actually worked. Whenever you ask that question, the answer is usually none or one. So, it's not rational for them to keep doing what they've done before. It comes back to challenge and educate. Challenge what the client has done before and then educate the client on new approaches.

**MCNews: When challenging conventional wisdom, how do you help clients bridge the gap between intellectual acceptance of a new idea and the more emotional aspect of taking action on it?**

**Cope:** Consultants should consider the idea of a spiral process. You don't just go through the Seven Cs once, but multiple times, looping larger each time. For the first spin, do a small test. Say to the client, here's an idea to try. Let's clarify it, come up with a solution, make a small change, test it, measure results, make sure they are going to last and then close it down. Then you go around again in a larger spiral with a more substantial project. As this process continues, the client gets more and more comfortable that the solutions you are generating will give them the success they want.

The emotional fear that is natural with any change process is balanced by the intellectual appreciation that the solutions work. Clients, especially those who are accountable to shareholders, need this chain of confidence.

**MCNews: Based on your experience, is any one of the Seven Cs overlooked by consultants more than the others?**

**Cope:** The close. Often it tends to be, how was that for you? Then, you roll over and rush on to the next assignment. The close is really the point of sale, and the maxim for any consulting work is that you close the engagement, but you never close the relationship.

In the close stage you do four things: you look back and learn; you insure that the client understands how you added value; you cut the ties of dependency so that the client is fully functional without you; and then you say, how else can I help you?

Most consultants don't really focus on or understand the close process. Most of their energy is spent on client, clarify and create, and they don't get to confirm, continue and close before they have to go off to the next thing. As one of my colleagues put it, for most consulting, the process is client, clarify, create, change and run.

**MCNews: What changes do you see coming for the consulting industry over the next few years, and what do you think clients will be looking for in consultants?**

**Cope:** I think it's going to be about value realization, about proving that we can add value that will last. I define consulting as the delivery of value through sustainable change. Consultants should be clear on the change they deliver, on what it is they are doing that is different and the value of that, and should have confidence that it's going to last.

Going back to education again, I run Seven Cs programs for clients as well as for consultants, and train clients to understand consultants. The more you educate clients how to be better buyers the more it will scare some consultants as clients start to ask for three things: change, value and sustainability.

**MCNews: Do you have any suggestions for our readers on great resources on consulting—books or Web sites?**

**Cope:** I'm a real fan of Chris Argyris, and Gerard Egan as well. They delve into areas that I think can help consultants understand the psychological aspects of the client relationship. Certainly, the re-write of the book that I'm doing now will include a lot more about cognitive dissonance and why people say one thing but do something else.

In the end, it's all about humanity and human behavior. Consultants need to better understand this dynamic. So much consulting is focused on task, but it is really about being human, about understanding the person.

**MCNews: Thanks very much for your time.**

You can find out more about Mick Cope at <http://www.wizoz.co.uk/>, and learn about his 7 Cs educational program at [http://www.wizoz.co.uk/sticky\\_change.html](http://www.wizoz.co.uk/sticky_change.html).