

HIRING A CONSULTANT

By Richard Male

Consultants are NOT rainmakers nor miracle workers, but just people who have accumulated knowledge and skills over years of practice (both failing and succeeding) and are willing to be hired by an organization to do a specific set of tasks for a fee. There are thousands of consultants across the country that specialize in nonprofit organizations and they run the gamut - from the extremely professional and top notch to the used-car-salesman types (just like in any profession). So how do you seek out a consultant that is right for your organization?

Generally there are **three** times when organizations can effectively use consultants.

- The **first** is during the start-up phase when the organization is just forming its board of directors, and must look clearly at developing its mission statements, programs and staff. It is valuable to bring someone in at this juncture to work with the leadership in order to get the organization off on the right foot.
- The **second** time where consultants usually fit in well is during the growth stage of the organization. In this stage, the group may be a few years old, has lots of energy and passion, is willing to take risks, and is starting to diversify its board. In this stage the programs are usually **way ahead** of the organization's infrastructure, and the organization is stressed, people are experiencing burnout, and there is a high level of staff turnover. In this stage there is a need to get the programs and the structure in balance - a consultant can help in this process.
- The **third** instance when consultants can generally help is when an organization is **going down** - losing momentum, energy, excitement, and needs to be turned around if it is to avoid going bankrupt.

If you find your organization in one of these three stages of nonprofit development it probably makes sense to look at bringing in a consultant.

Since Richard Male and Associates is in the consulting, training and coaching business, we're offering some tips right from the horse's mouth on how to find the best consultant for your organization:

1. **Be clear about what you want** - It is important to clearly define the problem or issue for which you are seeking assistance and to define this with clarity and certainty. Do we need someone who could assist us with a strategic plan? Are we seeking a resource development/fundraising consultant to evaluate our donor or membership programs? Do we really need a coach to spend an hour per week with our development director to help him/her understand how to deal with conflict better? Are we seeking someone to facilitate a board retreat? All of these tasks require different talents, skills and personalities, so be clear on what you need.
2. **Write a job description** - After you have analyzed what it is you need, write it down as an actual job description in an RFP (request for proposal) so you are clear in writing as to what type of consultant you need. Include skills and requirements, the timelines for the deliverables, and the amount of money you are willing to spend on this consultant.
3. **Interview a few candidates** - After you advertise or circulate your request for consultants through your network, interview a few candidates. Make sure you are prepared for the interview with key questions that will help you determine the proper fit.
4. **Have at least two people interview the candidates** - It is always valuable to bring in one of your board members or another key staff person before deciding on the proper

- candidate. Don't make this decision alone, especially if the consultant will be working with the board of directors. You want to get buy-in and ownership from the leadership of the organization.
5. **Check references** - Make sure you check references - these should be clients they worked with in the last 12 months. Survey some people in your network, as well, to see how that person performs.
 6. **Listening is key** - It is critical that the consultant is a **good listener** and can hear and understand your issues and struggles. During the interview, make sure you check this out by asking for their feedback after you have explained your situation. See if they really heard you and can articulate exactly what you want.
 7. **Match the consultants past history with your type of organization and your stage of development** - If you are a grassroots social justice group a consultant who works primarily with larger arts organizations might not be a good match because they may find it hard to relate to your issues and culture. You need to make sure that person has the skills you need, **and** will understand your culture (not necessarily accept it).
 8. **Write a clear contract** - After you have made the decision to hire a consultant ask the consultant to write a contract that includes: stating the problems and issues to be addressed; listing their skills and capacities; their deliverables and timetables; fee structure including costs of travel, food and misc. expenses. Make sure you put in a termination clause that can be exercised by either party. Even though you may want to use *your own* contract format, let the consultant write you a contract so you can see how she/he puts together the information.
 9. **Discuss follow-up with the consultant** - If after the contract has been completed and you have a question, or want a short meeting with the consultant, will she/he charge you for their time? If so, how much?
 10. **Be clear who will be delivering the services** - If you want to hire a consultant who works with associates or a firm, make sure you find out who will be delivering the services to your organization.

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