

STEPS FOR SUCCESS: **ENGAGING A CONSULTANT**

Consultants can be vital assets to nonprofits and grantmakers alike, providing valuable expertise and services. This guide can help you find, hire, and partner with a consultant who delivers what you need through a process that makes good use of your resources.



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DIAGNOSE the Need

1

The process begins with thoughtful analysis of the task at hand.

There are almost as many reasons to hire a consultant as there are consultants. A consultant can bring in knowledge that helps you avoid re-inventing the wheel. They can assist you in developing a particular skill set, strategy, or system. Or they can offer special expertise to support you in deep learning and growth. Whatever the need, your consulting project should begin with a careful assessment of desired changes and accomplishments.

DO...

- Form a diverse team with a range of perspectives to help guide the project.
- Engage those who are directly affected in describing the problem or opportunity. Seek out varied points of view about what is needed and how to proceed.
- Build consensus among stakeholders about desired outcomes. Be explicit in articulating what solving the problem will mean at an individual and organizational level.
- Seek advice from colleagues who may have encountered similar challenges and opportunities.

ASK...

- What is the presenting problem? What root causes or structural factors might be at play?
- Why do we need to address this problem? What is the opportunity or goal we need help to achieve?
- Who has been involved in assessing the situation? Whose voices are not at the table? Where might our blind spots be?
- Are we committed to having conversations that may sometimes be uncomfortable, and are we prepared to receive and act on constructive criticism?
- Why can't we do this ourselves? What value might fresh eyes bring?

AVOID...

- Hiring a consultant to address a painful situation that your organization should handle more directly. If the problem is avoidance of unpleasant facts or a difficult personnel issue, a consultant is unlikely to be the solution.
- Glossing over the complexity of the challenge you are facing or presuming to know the solution. Leave space for the potential consultant to help you diagnose root causes and suggest a range of approaches.
- Moving forward if the project is not "owned" by everyone involved. Half-hearted cooperation from team members is not enough to yield good results – and may signal lack of agreement about what is needed.

ENVISION the Project

2

Your search will be enhanced by a clear statement of intent and desired results.

The design of an effective project is ultimately a collaboration between the consultant and the client. Begin with a set of key values, a strong problem definition, a compelling picture of success, and an open mind. Consider what skills you expect the consultant to bring to the table, how much consultant time you need and can afford, and how you as a client will contribute to project success. Be flexible – your thinking may evolve as you meet potential partners.

DO...

- Agree on values that will guide the hiring process and the project, including expectations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Identify the steps you'll take to put these values into practice.
- Prepare a project description that summarizes your current understanding of the problem, vision of project success, and potential deliverables, as well as timeline and budget parameters.
- Define role(s) for the consultant, as well as for key participants in your organization.
- Identify the essential skills and dimensions of diversity you are seeking in a partner, and why.

ASK...

- Do all stakeholders have a shared understanding of project values, goals, parameters, and roles?
- Are the deliverables, timeline, and budget reasonable in light of the results we expect?
- Are we committed to recruiting a diverse pool of candidates, meeting with potential consultants, and collaboratively developing a scope of work? If not, what are the equity implications of a closed process?
- How do we define "expertise"? Could this lead to implicit bias in hiring and partnering with a consultant?

AVOID...

- Hoping for a consultant to produce change that can only come from within. Consultants can mediate conflicts, facilitate difficult conversations, and engage people in understanding the case for a course of action. However, they can't change your organization's values or alter individual personalities. And ultimately, the authority to act remains with the client.
- Assuming that the work will be as good as done once the consultant is on board. Even straightforward technical work or contracts will require your engagement as the consultant clarifies goals, tests approaches, and adapts solutions.
- Expecting to be the consultant's only client. Make sure the timelines for your deliverables are fair.

PREPARE to Be a Great Client

3

It takes clarity, collaboration, and investment to achieve a great outcome.

Consulting projects succeed when they are treated as relationships, rather than transactions, and when both the consultant and client have a shared understanding of goals and expectations. All parties must commit skills and time, and engage in ongoing communication. Surprises can cause projects to go off the rails and relationships to fray. Plan to avoid or address pitfalls that include redrawn expectations, shifting deadlines, failure to provide timely input and feedback, or mixed messages to the consultant from various client representatives.

DO...

- Build a strong relationship with the consultant and expect to work alongside them for the duration of the project.
- Plan to revisit goals and approach regularly, checking in with all who are affected by the work.
- Mobilize key stakeholders and decision makers who must commit to the success of the engagement.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for everyone involved; identify one point of contact for the consultant.
- Schedule reasonable turnaround times for necessary input and review of draft work products.
- Think about what might stall or derail the project and discuss scenarios for addressing challenges if they emerge.

ASK...

- Do we have the time – and the commitment – to work closely with the consultant throughout the engagement?
- Does our point of contact for the consultant have the capacity, resources, and authority to make decisions concerning this engagement and to implement any recommendations that flow from it?
 - If not, do they have clearly defined support from those who *do* have the capacity, resources, and authority?
 - How will they integrate diverse input from throughout the organization and engage key stakeholders?
- What challenges can we anticipate? How might we prevent or address these challenges?
- What does the consultant need from us to ensure success (e.g., access to people, information, logistical support)?

AVOID...

- Assuming the consultant can do it alone. Discuss with potential consultants what they will need from you as a client. Plan enough time to gather and integrate substantive inputs and feedback from diverse voices at key points along the way.
- Making the consultant report to multiple “clients.” One person should serve as point of contact for the consultant to ensure efficiency as well as clarity of communications, and consistency of expectations, throughout the project process.

IDENTIFY Potential Consultants

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There are several ways to find an individual or firm.

For every need, there are likely many suitable consultants. The trick is to separate the experienced consultant from the novice, the generalist from the specialist, and the over-booked from the available. It is imperative to consider more than one consultant, so begin by building a good short list of qualified candidates with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

DO...

- Recruit a diverse pool of candidates. Research and use job boards, listservs, social media groups, directories, professional associations, conferences, training programs, and schools that serve groups underrepresented in your field.
- Contact colleagues and use your organization's networks to gain referrals, but keep in mind that if your networks are not diverse, a referral-based approach will replicate this lack of diversity.
- Consider whether an individual or a firm might be the best match for your needs; you might include both in your outreach.
- Circulate a project description. (Even if there is a consultant you consider ideal for the project, hearing from other candidates helps you test your assumptions – and learn about new consultants and capabilities.)

ASK...

- Which skills are essential, and which are nice to have? How will we assess each candidate's abilities consistently?
- Are we looking for a skill set available from a solo practitioner, or do we need a firm or team with a range of skills?
- What aspects of the consultant's experience and approach are most important to us?
- Who have we worked with historically? Does this reflect our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion? Do we need to adjust our consultant selection approach to better reflect our values?

AVOID...

- Requiring lengthy submissions from candidates at this stage. It is disrespectful of their time and places small consulting practices – which may be disproportionately owned by women and people of color – at a disadvantage.
- Relying on traditional notions of expertise (e.g., academic degrees, publications, awards) or the quality of written materials alone to narrow the pool of candidates. Look for factors most relevant to the type of project at hand.
- Being in too much of a hurry. Don't simply hire the first consultant who comes your way.
- Taking referrals at face value – be sure to follow up on any strong recommendation by asking your referral source about the work and outcome generated by the consultant.

DISCOVER Each Consultant's Abilities and Style

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Every candidate brings their own values, skills, experience, and approach.

This step combines thinking about your project design with getting to know prospective consultants. As you interview candidates, you will begin to grow relationships and learn about the expertise and approaches they bring. You will form opinions about what is truly central to your project. You will gain insights into the consultant's work style and the degree to which it complements your own. You will get a sense of how well the consultant listens to you and understands your work. You may learn about approaches that you had not previously considered. You can benefit by being open to adjusting your project concept based on these interactions.

DO...

- Revisit expectations about how diversity, equity, and inclusion will be considered. Identify and address potential sources of implicit bias in your consultant selection criteria and process.
- Prepare for interviews by reviewing consultant qualifications and making a list of questions. Include all stakeholders in the interview process to ensure diverse perspectives and buy-in.
- Develop a rubric that interviewers will use to assess candidates; review it together and calibrate understanding by all.
- Meet with multiple candidates, asking the same questions of each. Document impressions and supporting evidence.
- Be mindful of the power dynamic. Remember, this could be the start of a long partnership.
- Review work samples and check references.

ASK...

- What values guide your work? How do you put these values into practice?
- What is your understanding of our situation (the presenting problem, as well as potential root causes)? Have you worked with similar challenges before?
- What alternatives/options are available to us in terms of your approach, timeline, and budget?
- What do you expect from your clients? How would you describe a great consultant-client relationship?

AVOID...

- Using vague selection criteria, waiving the criteria discriminately, or asking different questions of each candidate. Don't advance or reject a candidate based on "gut instinct" or "cultural fit." These practices can carry implicit bias.
- Feeling intimidated when interviewing an expert. Prospective consultants should be able to communicate constructively, explain their practice and process, and address questions in ways that are clear and understandable.

SELECT a Consultant

6

This is the time to revisit your intent and complete due diligence.

You are ready to narrow the field to a preferred consultant – or perhaps two or three finalists. This is a moment to revisit your initial vision of the project. You now know enough to redefine or reaffirm what success would look like with each remaining candidate. While considering each finalist, think again about how much consultant time you need and can afford, and how you as a client can contribute to the success of the project.

DO...

- Involve key stakeholders in discussing each candidate's values, skills, experience, and approach – and the extent to which these attributes align with your needs.
- Use a clear, transparent decision-making process, referring to your rubric to ensure consistent assessments of candidates.
- Reflect on potential sources of bias in your assessments and whether your selection is consistent with your values.
- Identify any specific concerns or questions that you want finalists to address.

ASK...

- Which consultant's values, skills, experience, and approach seem to be best aligned with our needs? Why?
- Which consultant is best equipped to integrate the perspectives of the people most affected by the project?
- Which consultant would challenge us to think in new ways? How might that play out?
- Have we been clear enough about the expected time investment for the consultant and for our organization?
- If a firm or team is involved, which individuals will do the work? What role will each of them have, and who will lead? How much time should we expect from senior members of the consulting team?
- Is the engagement substantial or unusual enough to warrant a review of the agreement by our legal counsel?

AVOID...

- False economies, overvaluing lower rates, and undervaluing quality.
- Indecision, delay, or a lack of transparency about the process, especially if you are asking a busy consultant to keep time available for your project while you wait for necessary approvals within your organization.
- Requesting proposals from consultants you are not serious about. It drains their resources and can be especially detrimental to small consulting practices, which may be disproportionately owned by women and people of color. This approach could also harm your reputation and ability to solicit future proposals.

AGREE on Terms of the Engagement



A shared understanding of scope, work plan, and expectations spells success.

Following interviews and reference checks, invite the consultant(s) you are most interested in to devise a proposal and work plan. This document will serve as the project blueprint, codifying goals, sketching out activities to be pursued over a defined time frame, and stating a budget. The work plan is often prepared by the consultant at no charge, although compensating the consultant for their labor is a more equitable practice. In any case, you should not request a proposal unless you are seriously considering hiring the consultant, and you should plan to spend time ensuring that they have enough information about your organization and needs to construct a solid work plan. Partnering in this process and negotiating the specifics of the engagement is a mutual opportunity for client and consultant to get started with clear communication and expectations.

DO...

- Finalize the project goals, work plan, timeline, and budget. Establish check-in dates, milestones, and deliverables.
- If resources allow, compensate all consultants for time spent on proposal development, and include funds in the project budget for your selected consultant to develop staff or build intellectual capital. Consultants are a critical part of the nonprofit ecosystem, yet we rarely invest in their capacity.
- Co-create a payment approach. Identify reasonable conditions for the release of funds, and do your best to honor the consultant's needs, beginning the relationship from a place of trust.
- Ensure that the contract covers any confidentiality requirements as well as ownership and use of work products.
- Decide together on a process for resolving disagreements or ending the engagement that gives both parties the same options and remedies.

ASK...

- Does the work plan provide a clear picture of how the project will unfold? Do the check-in points allow for any flexibility?
- Is the amount of time the consultant will spend on each phase of the project clear and reasonable?
- Are the outcomes and deliverables clear, specific, and measurable? Remember, key outcomes might relate to the quality of the process (e.g., trust built, voices included), and outcomes can be measured in many ways (including qualitatively).

AVOID...

- Informality and handshake agreements. Billing should conform to an expected amount for an agreed deliverable. If parts of the project remain to be developed, you might do phased contracting (e.g., making "agreement on a phase two plan and budget" a phase one deliverable). Or, include a clause precluding charges to an activity prior to client approval of a plan.

MANAGE the Project and the Relationship

8

Strong communication takes center stage as the work unfolds.

A consultant is responsible for delivering the message their client *needs* to hear – even if it’s a message you might not *want* to hear. This is no easy feat, given the consultant-client power dynamic. During the selection process, probe for and discuss any potential conflicts or hard conversations that may arise. Try to elicit honesty and thank the consultant for their candor.

Sometimes, despite everyone’s best efforts, a consulting relationship doesn’t work out. If the road gets rough, approach the problem with curiosity, not blame. You should reflect on the causes (on *both* sides), give honest, constructive, and prompt feedback, and allow the consultant time to make adjustments. If the project remains off track, follow the contract mediation or termination steps – with appropriate notice, compensation for work to date, and ownership of completed products.

DO...

- Co-create a clear communications and decision-making approach, including regular check-ins. Make time for the consultant, and respond promptly to their requests for information, clarification, or guidance.
- Co-create a process for exchanging feedback in both directions. Make sure the team member assigned to this role has experience providing effective feedback to diverse staff/consultants.
- Avoid surprises by agreeing on a schedule for draft products and clarifying which deadlines are most important and why.
- Keep the budget on track through regular billings, and requirements for advance notice and approval of major changes.
- Be transparent if your context or priorities are shifting. Your consultant only has as much visibility into your work as you provide and will not be able to deliver a relevant product unless you share information.

ASK...

- Who will communicate with whom, through what channels, and how often? How will decisions be made?
- Are we meeting our goals together, or on track to meet them? How could we do better?
- As the client, am I holding up my end of the bargain? Do I keep appointments, respond to requests, schedule time to collaborate, meet deadlines, communicate clearly, and provide honest, constructive, and timely feedback?
- Have I made my expectations of the consultant explicit? Could my expectations be informed in any way by cultural bias?

AVOID...

- Unwritten rules. Identify any institutional or cultural norms that may inform your expectations of one another.
- Shying away from talking about a disappointment with the hope that things will improve. If you withhold feedback to avoid discomfort, by the time you share it, it may be too late to salvage the engagement – or retain trust.

REFLECT and LEARN

9

Every project generates learning and can inform improvement.

Take time during and after the project to reflect on what worked well and why, and to consider what you might do differently next time. Document these reflections and revisit them as you consider new consulting projects. Did the consultant meet your expectations? Did you meet theirs? Reflect not only on the consulting project, but also on your organization's purpose and goals, leadership and strategies, and ways it can change to anticipate and solve future problems. The best consultants will bring fresh perspective and insights, and help you develop powerful approaches to become more effective and resilient.

DO...

- Capture and record issues as they arise, including information on the roles both parties played and how (and how well) the issues were resolved. Document all important decisions made in the course of the project.
- Debrief with the consultant; ask for assessment of your organization's performance as a client. Keep in mind that the consultant-client power dynamic may make it difficult for the consultant to be candid.
- Debrief within your organization. Integrate feedback from all stakeholders to ensure an inclusive assessment as well as shared ownership of any learning or next steps.

ASK...

- How did our perception of the consultant as a good fit play out as the project progressed?
- What values, skills, experiences, and approaches did we correctly identify as important?
- How did we, as a client, contribute to the successes or challenges of the project?
- What would we do differently if we were starting the project today? What lessons will enhance our next search for a consultant?
- Would we recommend this consultant to colleagues? Under what conditions?

AVOID...

- Holding the consultant solely responsible for the project result. The consultant and client each contribute to a successful – or poor – outcome. Assess the key strengths and weaknesses of *both* parties accordingly.
- Assuming that one problematic engagement means that the consultant is not capable. Their reputation is very important to their ability to make a living. Be very careful about what you say – and to whom – when an engagement doesn't work out.
- Making generalizations about all consultants of a certain background (e.g., consultants of color) based on your experience with a single person or firm.

Additional Resources

Review these writings for more insights that can help you successfully engage consultants.

Center for WorkLife Law. "[Interrupting Bias in Hiring: Tools for Organizations.](#)" 2018.

Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center. "[Working with Consultants.](#)" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Kibbe, Barbara D. "Both Sides of the Equation." *The Foundation Review* 7, no. 1 (2015): 56-70.
doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1235

Maine Association of Nonprofits. "[Guide to Working with Consultants.](#)"

The following books are guides for consultants and offer insights into different consulting approaches and styles that may be of interest to anyone preparing to engage a consultant. In particular, Schein's book offers examples of consulting projects that were reshaped as a result of the interview process.

Block, Peter. *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer, 2011.

Lukas, Carol Ann. *Consulting with Nonprofits: A Practitioner's Guide*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1998.

Schaffer, Robert H. *High-Impact Consulting: How Clients and Consultants Can Work Together to Achieve Extraordinary Results*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Schein, Edgar H. *Humble Consulting: How to Provide Real Help Faster*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, 2016.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has produced and supported additional resources related to specific consulting disciplines. See next page...

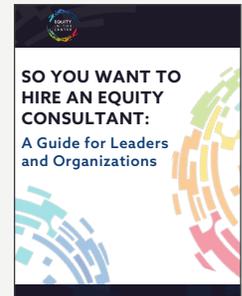
WORKING WITH CONSULTANTS SERIES

Consultants support the effectiveness of nonprofit agencies and grantmakers in many ways and on many levels. Based on lessons we've learned as well as the experiences of grantees we support, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation offers resources for working with consultants. This series features a guide for helping organizations take steps to find, hire, and partner with a consultant. It includes Foundation-generated essays on working with consultants who specialize in strategic planning, communications, evaluation, and fundraising, as well as a resource developed by Equity in the Center on partnering with equity consultants.

Access the full series online at sdbjrfoundation.org/effectiveness/consultants or issuelab.org



Start by reading this tutorial featuring nine steps to partnering with a consultant. It's accompanied by a set of frequently asked questions.



View these materials when engaging consultants to support specialized topics.



If needed, use this guide to develop a Request for Qualifications (RFQ), a more equitable alternative to a Request for Proposals (RFP). In many cases, however, you may benefit from a relational approach – and altogether avoid issuing RFQs or RFPs.

A VISION FOR CALIFORNIA

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions a productive, vibrant, and sustainable California that is a model of success and a source of innovation.

A COMMITMENT TO NOW

California faces many critical challenges, which require resources and imaginative solutions. In response to this reality, the Board of Directors decided to invest all the Foundation's assets by 2020. This decision reflects a commitment to identifying lasting solutions for education and the environment sooner, rather than later. The Foundation also invests in building the capacity and resiliency of grantee organizations to leave them positioned to carry on the work of furthering a successful California for decades to come.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In spring of 2020, the Foundation undertook a revision of *Steps for Success* (first published in 2018). Our goal was to refresh the content to help advance equity in consulting engagements.

This revision would not have been possible without the help of four external reviewers who shared their expertise, experience, and thoughtful feedback on the original tool. We extend our deepest appreciation to Marcelo Bonta, Sabrina Coleman, Omowale Satterwhite, and Jasmine Sudarkasa.

We offer this revision with humility, acknowledging that opportunities to go deeper remain. For example, because this guide does not address matters of organizational policy, we decided not to integrate detailed content on supplier diversity, the practice of actively recruiting contractors from marginalized communities – though there seems to be a shortage of social sector resources on the topic. We hope others will take up the charge and continue to improve upon our work, so we can all grow in our ability to partner with consultants in ways that reflect our values and support our aspirations.

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