

THE ROLE OF

Healthcare

CONSULTANTS

By Cary Gutbezah, MD

Achieving Peak Performance

Many executives struggle with the question of whether it's worth hiring a consultant.

We think that it depends on the problem, the importance of fixing the problem, and whether the solution requires major or minor changes to implement an effective and durable solution.

When faced with clinical or organizational challenges, the first thing that most executives think is that their team should be able to fix any problem. For complex problems, this may be a naïve assumption. Complex problems cross departmental boundaries and require significant attention to ensure successful change. The work plans are detailed and substantial resources (including time and people) may be required. There are many reasons why management teams, even when the right people are on the team – can't solve the problem.

Before assuming that your team is going to fix the problem, ask yourself the following questions:

Does your team have the time to work on the problem?

Most hospitals have been financially stressed and have eliminated any slack resources. In other words, managers and staff are busy doing their jobs, and no one has time to redirect to projects. Working on a project means not doing something else. Is your staff really unable to stop doing something that has been taking their time? If your team can't reallocate enough time, the project is likely to be prolonged or, ultimately, fail.

Does your team have experience in fixing these problems?

It's a lot harder to fix a problem if you've never seen that type of problem before. To an inexperienced problem solver, problem solving often reveals issues that aren't considered until they become impossible to ignore. Sometimes problems persist because no one knows where to look to fix the problem. Even people with great track records may never have encountered certain types of situations. Experience is key. Isn't that why we go to specialists for complex medical problems rather than to our primary care physicians?

Does the culture support or inhibit fixing the problem?

It's a lot harder to fix a problem if the solution isn't consistent with the culture of the organization. Changing cultures is hard work. It's not hard to change the *expressed* cultural message, but it's much harder to change the *enacted* cultural messages. In addition, it's often difficult for people who are immersed in an organization to recognize cultural influences on the problem. Outsiders are more likely to see these issues and bring them to the attention of the management team.

When do you really need a consultant to fix a problem?

Does your team have experience in managing large projects?

Complex problems require project management expertise. Project management procedures reduce the chance of making errors that undermine corrective action. Many hospital managers don't have this experience. Managers supervise processes and usually deal with brushfires that require instantaneous problem-solving. This skill is very different from solving complex system problems and managing large projects.

Is your team blinded by assumptions caused by living with the problem for a long time? Often when managers are used to problems, they fail to see things that are readily apparent to an outsider. Or perhaps previous attempts at change have failed, so there is a cognitive bias to stop that approach and try something else. Many times, failed change attempts are due not to the approach, but to inadequate execution. Biases shape perceptions and prevent awareness of emerging opportunities. Many times it takes an outsider to see these biases and bring them to the surface for discussion.

Finally, if you believe that the team can fix the problem, and then ask one question. If they can solve the problem, why hasn't it been fixed yet? A critical and unbiased attempt at answering this question will determine whether your belief is realistic.

If a significant issue has persisted, believing that your staff will fix it may be avoiding the problem and accepting the current situation.

If you are serious about fixing the problem, you have two questions to answer.

1. Is the benefit of fixing the problem outweighed by the cost of the consultant?
2. Is this consultant someone I can trust to help us fix our problem?

A good consultant brings project management skills, technical expertise, and time to work on the project. The consultant brings an outsider's perspective that isn't blinded by the familiarity of the situation. Like an experienced technician, the consultant knows where to look to find the causes of the problem. Because the project is the consultant's only concern, the consultant can bring focus and raise the priority of the project.

In the final analysis, consultants are only worthwhile if they can help you solve an important problem. If the problem isn't important, if you can tolerate the status quo, if your team can do something different to solve the dilemma, you may not need a consultant. On the other hand, a good consultant is like a good doctor; sometimes you need expert help.

Compass consultants point clients in the right direction.

Compass provides experience gained from years of working with hundreds of hospital leaders.

- Partnering with clients for the most sustainable, positive outcomes
- Moving faster to better solutions
- Offering complete services, from assessment through implementation

To learn more about how a consultant can make the difference in your hospital, contact Dr. Cary Gutbezahl at 513.241.0142

COMPASS GROUP, INC.™

2181 Victory Parkway Cincinnati, Ohio 45206
P: (513) 241.0142 F: (513) 241.0498

Compass Clinical Consulting is a brand of Compass Group, Inc.
© 2009 All Rights Reserved.