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Professional Pointers:

Shared Values With Clients Can Give You an Edge

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How can we as consultants better harness our career goals and personal satisfaction through our work? My hope is that this article will help answer this question.

I have learned many choose a profession in healthcare for altruistic reasons—a desire to serve is often an explanation. We can easily identify not only with direct caregivers, but also with leaders and others who do not provide direct patient care. These leaders impact change through efficient operations, strategic direction and an organizational culture that allows many to reach their goal of serving others.

After realizing the meaningful nature of our work, it is important to consider our client base, where we generate our business. We can examine the demographics of our clients and make some judgment on why they chose us to provide consulting services. Although it may be due to a specific expertise offered, we may find repeat business is not only because of the expert service provided but also because of similar values that unite us as partners throughout the consulting engagement. In the world of executive search, success is often based on finding the best fit for prospective candidates to the client's organizational needs and culture. If we look closely at our business practice and client demographics, we may learn we have been selected as the consulting organization to provide service because of *our fit* with the client's team we will serve. This differentiates us from those with whom we compete and can be a strategy for new client development.

We realize faith-based organizations' missions are often rooted in religious teachings, yet they are often similar to healthcare providers who do not have faith-based sponsorship. We have heard it said by many faith-based organization sponsors, "no margin, no mission." The same is true, in my opinion, for other healthcare providers and for-profit organizations—the goal is being good stewards of the resources provided, whether from a community, shareholder or religions sponsor. If our focus on service mirrors why many in healthcare chose to be in the profession—to serve and give back—we can consider this a differentiating factor from our competition (assuming we "walk the talk").

Let's consider how "walking the talk" can distinguish our services and allow us to be the firm of choice following an RFP process, thereby increasing the opportunity for repeat business and encouraging positive word of mouth referrals. The word *consistency* comes to mind. The above paragraphs refer to service and stewardship as values we have in common with clients. Service is the attitude, approach and spirit used in delivering that for which the client is paying. Stewardship is the responsible management of resources involved with the consulting engagement, including both financial and human capital (in other words, those on the external consulting team and the client's team supporting the consulting project). In my practice, I have found that having my consulting team reflect the values important to the client helps ensure success of the consulting engagement.

The professionals on the consulting team must be mentored to reflect the values of service and stewardship consistent with those found in the firm's mission statement and evident in the documentation supporting the project and all relationships through the conclusion of the project. It is my experience that sharing knowledge and mentoring the client's team also pays dividends in credibility with key constituent groups in the client organization. One of our goals should be to equip the client team with the knowledge to ensure all goals targeted in the consulting engagement continue after the firm's principals depart. Sustaining the desired outcomes for the client will garner support for future business and referrals.

Our experience has taught us that constants in the healthcare field are change and competition. We have tailored our services accordingly with hopes of maintaining a competitive edge. We are told the changes we are experiencing today are among the most comprehensive in decades with uncertainties of how our industry may look with additional anticipated changes. *What is your response to the change and uncertainty?*

Trusted advisers inside and outside healthcare have suggested affiliating with a larger firm (*partnership*), forming strategic alliances to diversify and provide complementary services (*connecting clients to vital resources available through like-minded firms*) and expanding to other industries beyond provider healthcare. Some clients have suggested they would prefer to retain their current consultant organization than lose the services to which they are accustomed. Learning what your clients think of your services can provide a platform to respond to change and remain relevant.

We should be asking ourselves: *What is our brand and how well is it recognized? Will retooling to address the changes we face help or hinder our success? Is there a firm with similar values and complementary services where a strategic alliance or partnership has mutual value?*

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