HIGH IMPACT CONSULTING: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

Reviewed by Joseph Ryan


The Big Questions

An anthropologist studying business practices in the waning years of this century would indeed be perplexed both by the staggering growth of management consulting as a global industry and the “magical” roles often played by management consultants inside and outside of corporations (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996).

Are management consultants (Robert Reich [1991] calls them “symbolic analysts”) a powerful and growing occupational and social class in the global economy, the new high priests of business in our times? What do management consultants actually do? How do they structure their work? Where and how do they create value? How are productive working relationships with clients (executives, managers, boards) built, sustained, repaired when broken, renewed, terminated? What are the salient differences and key distinctions between internal and external consultants? How does one learn consulting skills? And, particularly relevant to readers of this journal, in what ways does management consulting offer a useful paradigm and a set of practices, a worldview in the terms of our anthropologist, for achieving the long-heralded “new HR roles.”

In short, is the new HR professional as “strategic partner” a de facto consultant (Ulrich, Losey, & Lake, 1997)?

A View from the Field

Robert Schaffer’s new book speaks to many (but not all) of these big questions and does so through the lens of 30 years of practice—extensive fieldwork in the anthropological sense of the term. In this review, I argue that Schaffer’s book can best be thought of as an advanced primer, a guide for consultants as fieldworkers, a kind of “tough-minded” version of Peter Block’s popular *Flawless Consulting*.

In short, this book is a hands-on introduction to a point of view and a set of fieldwork instructions of what management consulting is and is not. At the project level it is an introduction to how to best structure operational improvement projects and larger strategic change initiatives that address real and pressing operating problems, organizational misalignments, and emerging strategic opportunities.

A Point of View

Robert Schaffer is an industrial engineer by training with an Ed.D. in organization psychology. He is the founder (now going on 30 years) of a boutique consulting firm specializing in performance improvement and change management. Schaffer’s 1987 book, *The Break-
through Strategy, and his well-known Harvard Business Review articles on change management have earned his work a following by thoughtful yet practical-minded consultants (both internal and external).

This new book does not break new ground. Rather, it codifies a view that Schaffer and his associates and, importantly, his clients have been developing and testing in the field for over 30 years. High Impact Consulting draws on examples and case vignettes from both large and small firms as well as from public agencies. Client examples are drawn from the likes of well-known organizations such as Dun & Bradstreet, Motorola, GE, AlliedSignal, Bell Canada, SmithKline Beecham, the State of Connecticut, and others. The connecting thread running through all of the case examples is Schaffer's unflinching commitment to a particular type of consulting philosophy and set of fieldwork practices.

Upon first reading, the intent of Schaffer's book appears to be simple and straightforward. The consultant helps the client achieve results. Anyone who has thought deeply about the dilemmas of general management and experienced the felt irrationality (at times) of organizational life, however, knows it is extremely difficult to get the straight story. Who is the real client? What is the deeper problem? How are complex and competing interests aligned to achieve results? Other questions and dilemmas come to mind. Clearly, this type of work is not for the faint-hearted.

Schaffer's point of view is crisp and clear and, importantly, involves the consultant enacting a complex set of skills and business judgments involving technical, analytical, conceptual, interpersonal, and entrepreneurial competencies and a unique array of "multiple intelligences" in Gardner's and Sternberg's terms (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1997). This enactment (Weick, 1995) process is integral to Schaffer's brand of consulting. Consulting here has little to do with a final written report and a great deal more to do with real time learning and problem solving. The theory behind the competence and effectiveness of this type of consulting is less clear, and the critical reader is left wanting a deeper level of description. The enactment of these consulting skills remains mysterious in some fundamental ways. More of the novelist is needed in telling the stories of how high impact consultants work.

The Book's Structure and Argument

The remaining sections of this review overview the structure of the book and then highlight key themes in Schaffer's argument.

The book has three parts. Part one addresses "Why Management Consulting Fails and How It Can Succeed." This is the most polemic side of the book and represents a hard and harsh critique of what Schaffer calls low-yield conventional consulting. Five fatal flaws (pp. 17–26) are identified and examined as Schaffer unpacks the assumptions and consultant/client mindset that stand behind much of what is considered good management consulting today.

Schaffer argues that conventional consulting models do the following:

1. underattend to client readiness for change,
2. emphasize project scope being driven by one big solution versus a strategy of experimentation and small wins,
3. underestimate the hard work of building a client/consultant partnership and, sadly,
4. collude with and in the management (often flawed and outright mismanagement in some cases) of consultant resources in the labor-intensive use versus leveraged use of consultants.

Parts two and three are the heart and soul of Schaffer's argument and warrant higher marks. Here he addresses "the architecture of high-impact consulting," "creating high-impact partnerships," and the need for "design versatility" (p. 158) as core consulting skills. Schaffer's starting and ending point is a view of consulting where "clients and consultants take aim from the first moment at achieving some tangible results" (p. 49). This orientation puts primary emphasis on the "front-end" definition of project scope and the structuring of an assignment. Here partnership with the
client in implementation and the achievement of results are the value added, the core competence brought to the table by the consultant.

This does not, so Schaffer argues, "obviate the need for research, conceptual and strategic thinking" (p. 61). The point is clear, however, that the "lofty role of diagnosticians and solution providers" (p. 133) where the consultant takes up primarily a "study" orientation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in this model. Rather, the emphasis is on translating, that is, chunking business problems and projects into a series of rapid cycle and breakthrough projects that mobilize and increase the client organization's energy, skill, and effectiveness.

This high-impact consulting approach requires explicit work be undertaken on the client's readiness to change, the mapping of client stakeholders and, importantly, the "enactment" of what appears to be a unique blend of process and content skills (p. 40) in the consultant/consulting team. The client with appropriate consulting support thus acts his/her way into new thinking and the achievement of results. The operative words are act and results. This point of view is illustrated by many clear but brief examples. Fewer and more detailed case examples and thicker descriptions of the client's present situation and the actual tasks, steps, roles, and dilemmas taken up, played out, and faced by the consultant (and the client) would make Schaffer's argument more compelling.

His argument is made on the basis of the facts, that is, the results Schaffer and his clients have achieved. The problem, however, is that the facts of the case/cases reported and the results achieved are hard to understand without more contextual information. The context needs to be defined at both a macro level in terms of economics and the cost and value drivers of the business and at the micro level in terms of social and psychological dynamics enacted. Even the longer case studies such as that of Dun & Bradstreet Information Services (pp. 136–139), where eight rapid-cycle projects were used to launch a major change initiative, fail to give the reader enough context to see how high-impact consulting was enacted. Schaffer the pragmatist could benefit from a more academic mindset, a Harvard Business Review case-study orientation, and a more explicit and better developed conceptual argument.

At the substantive level, my sense is that Schaffer is opening up an important pathway and plowing some new ground—ground unfamiliar (and threatening) to many consultants. First and foremost this model shifts the focus of the consulting effort from study, from expert models, methodologies, and knowledge systems to action, praxis, or more accurately, to study in action. Schaffer's point of view emphasizing experiential, results-based learning (pp. 212–213) and achieving tangible results remain essential features of this consulting value proposition.

I would also have liked a longer discussion of issues addressed in the chapter, "Building Communication Bridges and Overcoming Anxiety." This chapter is a solid and important contribution to the literature on consulting; however, it is a rework of a 1983 article by Schaffer and a colleague called Anxiety: The Consultant's Unwelcome Companion. This new chapter adds virtually nothing new to the earlier argument. It does not build on important theoretical work done by Chris Argyris on "organizational defensive routines" (Argyris, 1993) where there is a potential tight and logical fit in terms of how client and consultant barriers are resolved. Finally, it does not address or build on the rich traditions of critical thinking and research in strategy development and change management, important dimensions of intellectual capital in repositioning HR. This omission plus the failure to establish strong and clear conceptual connections to the strategy and/or the core processes of the business are indeed puzzling since one of Schaffer's four criteria for fast-cycle projects is articulating an underlying strategic rationale, a business case for the project, "not simply [achieving] a momentary tactical advantage" (p. 90).

Schaffer is a first-rate practitioner; he falls short as a theorist. Perhaps more telling, and an issue that goes well beyond Schaffer's work, is the undertheorized nature of consulting work. To the extent that ideas, intellectual capital, and knowledge-based capabilities are integral to successful business strategy, orga-
nization effectiveness, and human resource practices, one is left wanting clearer ideas and theories of business and organization life.

Relevance to HR Executives

This book is not written explicitly for HR executives. The consulting approach outlined is, however, deeply relevant to HR professionals at all levels. In fact, Schaffer will be a speaker at the 1997 HR Consulting Skills and Tools Conference and has for many years offered a public workshop, “Consulting for Results.” The relevant question to address is the obvious one of how and why Schaffer’s work is relevant to human resource professionals.

His work is relevant in two fundamental and interrelated ways and, importantly, in a generalist way in the best sense of that term: first, at the level of roles and competencies, that is, in how the HR professional can best take up the strategic partner role; and second, at a practical level in managing external and internal consultants and structuring and launching projects. On both fronts, Schaffer’s message is one of optimism and the message is clear. Think in terms of the business’s needs and results (not consulting products). Think in terms of partnerships as the core building blocks. Think in terms of implementing business strategy and operational improvement projects as experiments involving results-based learning. Think of managing external consultants in a more demanding fashion where implementation and execution capabilities are the admission tickets and the hallmark of value added. Finally, think of yourself (as an HR professional) and think of consulting overall in terms of “fieldwork” and less in terms of doing a study.

This book paints a picture, albeit an uneven one, of high impact consultants in action. Obviously there are salient differences between internal and external consulting that Schaffer glosses over in his brief discussion of the two sides of the boundary (p. xv).

In sum, the results achieved by high impact consultants (both internal and external) help establish the business case here, build credibility, and reinforce reputation in simple terms. A virtuous circle of competence, partnership, learning, and results is enacted; although precisely how and under what entry conditions remain somewhat mysterious. This type of consulting approach and process is both case- and client-specific and dependent upon rather sophisticated joining, influence, and partnership skills by consultants that go well beyond conventional project and account management.

In the real world of HR practice, however, dilemmas abound. As Michael Beer suggests in an insightful essay in Tomorrow’s HR Management (Ulrich, Losey, & Lake, 1997):

Perhaps the most formidable of the obstacles is the capability of most human resource professionals. To play a strategic role they will have to have analytic and interpersonal skills equal to the best consultants corporations now use to assist them with organization effectiveness and change issues. (p. 93).

To the extent HR in a given business has access to the table, that is, as HR professionals move deeper into the strategy and operational processes of the business, as they are asked to help structure and manage large-scale change projects (and work with external expert consultant resources), Schaffer’s book offers timely and practical support and advice. Although he neglects theory (and his book suffers on that account) and does not outline a definitive roadmap for learning these competencies and this brand of consulting, it is clear that this particular consulting mindset is best learned in the field, in the world of practice. Hopefully more and more HR executives and professionals will follow Schaffer’s pragmatic path and act their way into new thinking to deliver tangible business results.

Nothing less should be expected when HR professionals take up their role and act as strategic partners.

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REFERENCES


