



What Nonprofit Leaders Should Consider Before Engaging a Consultant¹

Know the consultant's role. Before you decide if you need a consultant, make sure you are very clear on what a consultant's "job" is and what it is not.

Consultants can:

- Provide and develop capacity lacking internally in the organization. This can be time, skills or knowledge.
- See the entire picture. Since they are not entrenched in the daily details of running your organization, consultants can provide a new perspective on the issues and root causes facing your organization.
- Facilitate and mediate between and for board and staff members.
- Be agents of change.
- Develop productive plans and tools that you can continue to use when they are gone.
- Help you achieve better results than you would be able to achieve on your own.

Consultants should not or cannot:

- Do your work for you. Unless you are hiring the consultant for a short-term project where they are acting as staff, their role is to add to and maximize the work that you do. For the project to be successful, you and your staff will have to do a lot of work, perhaps even more than you normally would without the consultant on the project.
- Read minds. If you are not clear and transparent, it will be difficult for the consultant to help you.
- Be blamed for problems they identify, but did not cause.
- Be 'guns for hire'. No one wants to do your dirty work for you, especially if you can do it more cost effectively on your own.
- Repeat tasks. Do not become dependent on consultants to do the same task for you year after year. They should provide a tool that helps you achieve sustainability.

Think twice before hiring a consultant:

- If the consultant is performing ongoing work and is under your direct supervision, you might be violating IRS rules (see <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/i1099msc.pdf>).
- If you haven't clearly articulated your outcomes, you most likely won't get results from the consultant that are satisfactory to you or your board.
- If you already know what you want. If you just want someone else to deliver the decision to your staff or your board don't hire a consultant.
- Make sure you have board agreement. Ideally, get an ad hoc board committee to oversee the consultant's progress.

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¹ This information was compiled from focus groups The Forbes Funds conducted in 2009 with consultants and nonprofit leaders who have received Management Assistance Grants from The Forbes Funds.