

The Courageous Consultant

Seven Keys to Becoming
an Exceptional Advisor



ROB BERG

© 2021 by Rob Berg
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be directed to permissions@indiebooksintl.com, or mailed to Permissions, Indie Books International, 2424 Vista Way, Suite 316, Oceanside, CA 92054.

The views and opinions in this book are those of the author at the time of writing this book, and do not reflect the opinions of Indie Books International or its editors.

Neither the publisher nor the author is engaged in rendering legal or other professional services through this book. If expert assistance is required, the services of appropriate professionals should be sought. The publisher and the author shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused directly or indirectly by the information in this publication.

ISBN-13: 978-1-952233-60-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2021908574
Designed by Bill Ramsey

INDIE BOOKS INTERNATIONAL®, INC.
2424 VISTA WAY, SUITE 316
OCEANSIDE, CA 92054
www.indiebooksintl.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
CHAPTER 1	
The Courage To Be Exceptional.	1
Being A Consultant	6
Some Troubling Anecdotes	11
CHAPTER 2	
A Worthwhile Journey	15
A Brief Look At The Seven Keys	16
My Rocky Start	20
Getting Serious	25
Who This Book Is For	27
Onward!	28
CHAPTER 3	
The First Key: Know Who You Are	31
Our Psychological Needs	35
Discovering Our Character Strengths	39
In Practice	48
Using The First Key	50
CHAPTER 4	
The Second Key: Master The Basics	51
Basic Skills	56
Basic Qualities	62
In Practice	68
Using The Second Key	69
CHAPTER 5	
The Third Key: Always Be Curious	71
Types Of Investigation	74
Motivational Interviewing	82
Coaching Approaches to Consulting	85

In Practice	87
Using The Third Key	89

CHAPTER 6

The Fourth Key: Think Holistically	91
What's In Your Enchilada?	95
Question Everything	100
Second- And Third-Order Effects	107
In Practice	107
Using The Fourth Key	109

CHAPTER 7

The Fifth Key: Provide Value (Not Hours)	111
The Consultant's Contract	114
The Value Of Value Pricing	115
Creating Value	119
Getting Work	122
In Practice	126
Using The Fifth Key	128

CHAPTER 8

The Sixth Key: Get Leverage	129
Be Prepared	132
My Way Or The Highway Will Get You The Highway	133
Hiring Subcontractors	134
Hiring Established Experts	137
Creating Reusable Artifacts	138
Developing Recurring Revenue Streams	142
Offering Retainer Agreements	145
Ethical Considerations	146
In Practice	147
Using The Sixth Key	149

CHAPTER 9

The Seventh Key: Make It Your Own	151
---	-----

Your Unique Vision	153
Your Unique Philosophy	157
Your Unique Principles	159
Your Unique Definition Of Success	160
Your Unique Approach	162
Frameworks	164
In Practice	167
Using The Seventh Key	169

CHAPTER 10

Getting Clients On Board—Or Not	171
Client Organizations As Systems	175
We Just Disagree	177
We Like Our Way Better	179
Mind Your Own Business!	182
We Need You To Stay In Your Lane	185
We Need To See Your Rate Card	187
We Don't Allow Subcontractors	189
We Heard Of A Better Way	190
Conclusion	192

CHAPTER 11

An Exceptional Advisor	195
The Courageous Consultant	200
Getting Engaged	206

CHAPTER 12

The Unanswered Question	209
Seven Keys Revisited	212

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	219
------------------------------	-----

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	221
-------------------------------	-----

ENDNOTES	223
-----------------------	-----

INDEX	227
--------------------	-----

CHAPTER 1

The Courage To Be Exceptional

"We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win."

JOHN F. KENNEDY

NEARLY SIXTY YEARS AFTER IT WAS FIRST DELIVERED, President Kennedy's September 12, 1962 speech, from which the quote above is taken, is as relevant as ever.

It was a call to arms for a nation embroiled in a new kind of war—a Cold War—being waged in response to the idea that another conventional war would only bring incalculable catastrophe. So the times called for a new kind of leadership, a new kind of response, where we as a nation were asked to turn inwardly to better ourselves to demonstrate our strengths, rather than outwardly in

displays of aggression that would only serve to hasten a path toward mutually assured destruction.

And the message from the outset was that it was not going to be easy; it would, in fact, be hard. But it was going to “serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” What more meaningful pursuit could there be than bringing together a nation of individuals, challenging them to do their collective best, and effectively disarming their common enemy without a single drop of blood being shed in the process? Less than seven years after that memorable oration, Neil Armstrong stepped from the *Eagle* and into history. Twenty years after that, our number-one adversary disbanded and was no more. President Kennedy’s speech had marked a signal shift in the way we dealt with our foes.

While using this example may be an abuse of metaphor, the parallels with our own mission as consultants are apparent. No, we’re not really embroiled in a war, cold or otherwise, with our competitors. But we do see many of them fighting outwardly to win by employing legions of resources that can be deployed on a moment’s notice, rather than turning inwardly to better themselves and the results they produce for their clients. We do see consulting firms that value earnings and share price over client results and hear a consistent stream of stories of strained relationships between consultants and clients where expectations fail to materialize and promises are forgotten. We do work among competitors whose principal measure of success is *staff utilization*—the percentage of working hours billed to clients—and work beside firms that count hours over outcomes as measures of their progress.

And we all know we can do better than this.

THE COURAGEOUS CONSULTANT

We know our best counteroffensive is a thoughtful response to the appalling abuses that leave clients with little more than a large invoice and a renewed sense of cynicism. And that's why the best among us go to work each day. That's why we confidently pursue some of the industry's highest-profile work against far larger competitors. And that's why we consistently prevail.

We choose to go to the moon.

"Why do anything unless it is going to be great?"

PETER BLOCK

We get there by becoming great at what we do. We get there by working hard to better ourselves as individuals as we help our clients realize important objectives. We get there by ensuring our clients derive a genuine benefit from our efforts and acknowledging that the amount of time we spend doing something has little to do with the value of a result. When we work with our clients, we demonstrate that we care about their businesses by understanding their challenges, by working together with them to define and solve seemingly intractable problems, by listening and constantly reframing our own perceptions of their challenges and the solutions to which they have entrusted our capable hands.

We get there by being exceptional advisors. We get there by being courageous.

THE COURAGEOUS CONSULTANT

The inspiration for this book came about as I was leading a small practice of my own. Following an inauspicious couple of years after the founding of the Operations & Technology Consulting practice at Perr&Knight—a boutique consulting organization with 120 employees and five domestic offices—we suddenly began to experience extraordinary growth. It became apparent that our modest operation was ill-equipped to handle consecutive years of double-digit expansion, as manual processes and paper-based administrative artifacts nearly ground us to a halt. As a process improvement expert, my duty-bound response was to document the best-known ways we had learned during our earlier years to perform certain basic activities that led to favorable outcomes. The result was a brief *Consultant's Guide* distributed to staff members, designed to instigate a refocusing of our collective energies. Where we had been distracted deciding how to market, propose, contract, plan, initiate, and conduct an engagement, our preferred approaches, once documented, became far more routine. Having a framework that served our foundational needs allowed us to focus our efforts on generating the results our clients were paying us for. Previously, we would waste precious time debating basic organizational principles. Worse, we would approach presentations, proposals, contracts, engagements, and client communications in a variety of disparate ways that did nothing to support the quality of our work, let alone promote our brand. The *Guide* changed that for our growing practice. And so I hope this writing will do the same on a grander scale.

To be sure, this book would perhaps more aptly be titled, *A Collection of Important Stuff Conscientious*

Individuals Should Master Prior to Calling Themselves Consultants due to the substantial amount of literature and experience I've attempted to distill into a single volume. But that title was a bit unwieldy and didn't fit well on the cover. Pragmatism prevailed over precision. And this rule, you will soon come to understand, is a core tenet of the profession.

My intention in sharing my ideas and experiences with a wider audience is to ensure I provide relevant information to a variety of individuals, regardless of their specific field of endeavor or area of specialization. I've tried my best to present complex concepts in as simple a way as practicable. While many sections provide my perspective on known good practices, know that they are just that—my perspective. As such, they are neither exhaustive nor should they be taken as gospel. Instead, they are recorded for the consulting professional to provide foundational knowledge I hope is always practical, often interesting, and occasionally provocative.

Further, my aim is to ensure the writing is approachable, leaving pedantic palaver or armchair analyses to far more qualified intellectuals and pundits. As I'm well known for repeating ad nauseum among my industry brethren and in a seemingly endless stream of presentations to prospective clients, I'm a *participant*, not an observer. And so this book is written by a participant for participants who would do well to examine the more academic works on the subject to inform their own sense of practicality. Whether a sole practitioner or member of a large firm, the principles promoted here should apply regardless. Ultimately, of course, you are the judge. For now, let's spend a day in the life of a typical consultant.

Being A Consultant

The alarm rings, and you reach from beneath the warmth of your comforter to stop it. You have an 11:00 a.m. meeting in Santa Monica. It's 4:30 a.m. in Boca Raton, and you have a plane to catch.

You slip gently from the bed, careful not to wake your sleeping wife, and fumble through the darkness to the kitchen downstairs.

Coffee.

Coming up on 5:00 a.m., you quietly carry your still-tired body back up a flight of stairs to shower and dress. By 5:30 a.m., you're in your car to begin the twenty-five-minute trek to Fort Lauderdale–Hollywood International Airport. Through security, you board the plane at 6:30 a.m. and pull back from the gate for the 7:00 a.m. departure. There's a young couple and their newborn infant in seats 11B and 11C; you occupy the window at 11A. The baby cries as the engine winds, and off you go.

You struggle to read, sleep, study meeting notes, or watch the six-inch screen embedded in the seat in front of you. You shift yourself to get comfortable in the twenty-nine-inch space afforded by your coach-class fare. The flight seems endless.

Finally, you feel a slight descent as the plane approaches the Los Angeles Basin. You wipe the remaining fatigue from your face as the plane lands, taxis, and arrives at the gate. You exit the plane at exactly 10:05 a.m. and walk the two hundred yards or so to head outside

THE COURAGEOUS CONSULTANT

to grab the Hertz rental car shuttle. The shuttle arrives five minutes later, picking up you and several other travel-weary passengers for the seven-minute journey to the rental car pickup location on Airport Boulevard. As a preferred customer, you note your name on the board as the shuttle arrives and bypass the rental counter to grab the blue Hyundai Elantra in stall 36C.

It's 10:32 a.m.

You've been here before and know your way around. You head down Sepulveda to Lincoln and wend your way through the Marina, then past Venice Beach toward Ocean Avenue. You arrive in Santa Monica, making a right on Wilshire and left on Fourth, and pull into the municipal parking garage on the west side of the street. You jump from the car and jog to the office building across the street. You enter the elevator, tuck in your shirt, and check your hair as the silvery doors shut and you rise to the third floor. Exiting, you walk toward the reception desk and announce yourself. The receptionist dutifully alerts the person you've come to see, offers you coffee or water, and points the way to the conference room where seven executives are assembled awaiting your arrival.

It's 11:10 a.m.

After a few cordial exchanges, the people in the room introduce themselves as you attach a cable from your laptop to the projector that will display that morning's presentation. It's a business case you've prepared for a \$50-million software procurement, and your audience is the company's executive committee. The chief information officer is the project sponsor, and he's counting on you to make the sale to the others.

You followed a similar routine last week, but that was in Austin, Texas. Two weeks ago, it was Boston. Next week, it's Columbia, Missouri, then Madison, Wisconsin.

You're a consultant.

Consulting is an interminably interesting profession, one that appeals to the curious adventurers among us. When approached properly, the type and variety of work virtually eliminate the possibility of boredom on the job. The travel, while trying at times, keeps us from wasting away behind a desk as we visit locations far and wide to offer our services. The learning experiences are continuous, with each engagement offering new material, providing an ever-expanding trove of ammunition in our problem-solving arsenals. And the work can be especially gratifying, as we are respected for the confidence with which we wield our expertise and acknowledged by our grateful clients for our perspectives, our solutions, and the benefits they provide when we succeed.

Unlike most other professions, however, consulting has devolved into a chaotic collection of pretenders who offer advice, take their fee, and move on. One often has no reliable way to confirm whether that advice was well-informed or utterly fabricated, worth the money or not, absent tangible results that often take months after an engagement to be realized. "I hope you know what you're doing," begs the apprehensive voice of the new client signing away their treasure in the hope that you're finally going to be the one who can fix their business.

In other professional lines of work, however, overt credentialing helps (somewhat) to soothe this apprehension. Your doctor, for example, provides evidence

of her competence by displaying a diploma on her wall and passing medical boards that affirm she has at least achieved a basic understanding of the human body and how to manage it. Likewise, your lawyer has been through the rigors of law school and passed a bar exam, and in so doing, has gained an understanding of basic legal principles.

And while you may not hold high praise for doctors or lawyers, the difference between those professionals and consultants is that not just anyone can call themselves a physician or an attorney-at-law. But anyone—and I mean *anyone*—can call themselves a consultant. And they are doing so in increasingly troublesome numbers.

The heart of the problem is that *consulting* has become a catchall term that defines work that is otherwise indefinable. Many victims of layoffs quickly set up shop as consultants, believing they can ply their knowledge and quickly regain some income. The retired executive ventures into consulting and purports to have answers only he can provide. So many consulting agreements have been written to simply justify payments to individuals who don't do very much at all. Consulting, as a result, has become a punchline profession that often struggles to remain credible. Even those souls with good intentions, determined to make the world better by offering their unique brand of expertise, often fall flat, failing to recognize the need for the good practices that lend themselves to consistency and quality—and the makings of a bona fide professional discipline.

THE COURAGEOUS CONSULTANT

"There is an art to advanced consulting as well as a science; who you are is as important as what you do."

WILLIAM A. PASMORE

Perhaps more tellingly than any other line of work, consulting reveals precisely who we are. Because the effectiveness of our efforts is rooted firmly in our problem-solving abilities, we often assume the role of crisis manager and require an instinctive ability to remain composed in the face of difficult circumstances. At our best, we are the firefighters who run toward danger while others are running away. The skills and experiences we bring to organizational challenges buttress the confidence we need to reassure those around us when the going gets tough. We've been called upon, after all, because we offer unique abilities and perspectives that complement or utterly supplant prior attempts to solve difficult problems that often threaten the viability of the client organization. So together, we find ourselves at the edge of an abyss. And when standing there, an old saying goes, we find our true character. But just what is that character?

Some Troubling Anecdotes

Even the most venerable of firms find themselves embroiled in controversy, apparently driven by greed and without regard for client outcomes or the second and third order consequences their recommendations may help to instigate. For example, New York City paid McKinsey & Company \$27.5 million to reduce prison assaults at Rikers Island. After the firm's recommendations were implemented, violence actually grew.²

As part of its work with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), McKinsey consultants recommended spending cuts on food and medical care for migrants and an acceleration of the deportation process. The firm was paid roughly \$20 million for that advice.³

McKinsey is also said to have “played a significant role in the 2008 financial crisis by promoting the securitization of mortgage assets and encouraged the banks to fund their balance sheets with debt, driving up risk, which ‘poisoned the global financial system and precipitated the 2008 credit meltdown.’”⁴

Allstate Insurance was advised by McKinsey consultants to consistently give lowball offers to claimants. The strategy, according to the *Huffington Post*, was to make claims “so expensive and so time-consuming that lawyers would start refusing to help clients.”⁵

Finally, McKinsey famously “advised opioid makers on how to ‘turbocharge’ sales of OxyContin, propose strategies ‘to counter the emotional messages from mothers

with teenagers that overdosed' on OxyContin, and help opioid makers to circumvent regulation.”⁶ That bit of ill-conceived advice-giving cost McKinsey nearly \$600 million in settlements with forty-nine attorneys general.⁷

In my own work, an insurance company client shared a fifty-plus-page data warehouse development and deployment plan produced by another major firm at great expense. I noted that the footer of the document for which my client parted with tens of thousands of dollars contained the name of another insurance company—implying the consulting firm simply reused a previously produced deliverable and again charged for it.

On occasion, I've found my own work products circling back around to me with minor modifications, as competing firms have co-opted them for their own benefit with no attribution or acknowledgment. While flattering, it's equally frustrating to have put my creative spin on a body of work, only to have it lifted by an imposter. I've also heard a former partner at a major consulting firm boast about suggesting to a client that they were undercharged due to a billing glitch to explain his desire to submit an updated invoice to reach the maximum available budget. No surprise that he was terminated.

To be sure, these are exceptions; there are far more stories of great things consultants have done, and the success of the consulting industry is tangible proof that consulting done right can be extraordinarily valuable. Those few transgressions, however, besmirch the industry as a whole and contribute to its flagging reputation. We can do better.

We do well when we focus on outcomes that contribute to our clients' fortunes, not diminish them by

consuming budgets. We do better when we set hours aside as a measure of progress and focus on value. We enjoy longer-term relationships when we maintain an air of humility rather than entitlement. And when the curtain is pulled back, and we realize the benefits of remaining in service to our clients rather than seeking their praise for our genius, we gain a major bonus: our work becomes fulfilling. We satisfy our psychological needs. We even, in some sense, become immortal. We'll dive deeply into those lofty ideas in later chapters.

For now, let's explore the way forward and uncover gems along the way to help us up our game and become the exceptional advisors our clients deserve.