

Book Review: High- Impact Consulting

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High-Impact Consulting

Robert H. Schaffer

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"High-Impact Consulting" can be summed up in the tagline from the Nike ads - "Just Do It." Rather than focus on protracted large-scale engagements that may or may not produce the desired results, author and consultant Robert Schaffer recommends identifying a series of manageable, small-scale projects with specific (and measurable) business results. Consultants should then form a partnership with client executives to facilitate execution by the client's own staff -- staff who know the business better than the consultants, and who are in a position to apply and extend the insights gained from delivering the project results. There's still a role for the armies of worker-bee associates, but those assignments aren't truly "consulting" assignments. Such engagements really represent technical outsourcing or staff augmentation arrangements, and should be recognized and managed accordingly.

Schaffer makes a persuasive case for his highly leveraged consulting paradigm, so persuasive that it sounds perfectly logical, even obvious. After all, why shouldn't consultants focus on delivering immediate and quantifiable business benefits? Why shouldn't consultants facilitate and support client staff, the people who really need to get the work done? But he's right. Prevailing consulting practices are almost the exact opposite of what he recommends. The consulting industry may have morphed from high-powered strategy development to a business process and technology focus, but the overall mode of operation hasn't really changed that much. Consulting firms still assign large teams of expensive talent who do the work and produce some "deliverable" (whether a voluminous "analysis," a redesigned business process, or some type of computer system) which the client is then expected to productively utilize. When it comes to delivering results, at least one major consulting firm (which is likely representative of the others) specifically charges its engagement managers NOT to make written promises regarding client benefits. Promises to perform an analysis or install computer software are perfectly acceptable, but whether or not the client actually gets any benefit from the effort isn't something the consultant should be responsible for; that's the client's problem. Rather than risk a lawsuit when the benefits don't materialize, these consultants abdicate accountability for all but a handful of items that fall under the consultant's direct control. No wonder so many major consulting projects fail!

In many ways, the practices that Schaffer advocates represent good old-fashioned management, leadership, and coaching. Set specific goals and hold people responsible for meeting them. Break overwhelming problems down into small pieces which can be solved in realistic time frames to yield immediate operational benefits, insights for tackling remaining problems, and the morale boost that comes from a job well done. Focus on implementation and results, rather than waste time "laying the groundwork" or developing grandiose pie-in-the-sky strategies. Take responsibility for solutions, rather than relying on consultants to "tell us what to do" or "solve the problem for us." And yet, good old-fashioned management isn't always enough.

Schaffer is sensitive to criticisms that a focus on immediate results slights the benefit of developing strategic insights. In defense of his approach, he observes that "consultants who dismiss rapid-cycle projects as merely picking the low-hanging fruit fail to see that these projects develop the organization's capability to go after the higher-hanging fruit. By contrast, conventional consulting reports that recommend big strategic changes beyond the client's ability get bogged down by the implementation gap and rarely pick any fruit at

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all." The truth, in fact, is that successful management requires both. An elegant strategy that isn't implemented is worth little, but a series of energetic rapid-cycle projects that lack strategic grounding can easily end up diverting resources to solve the wrong problems. While he is correct in advocating a focus on immediate results, it is essential that the focus remain governed by an informed strategy to take the organization where it needs to go.

Schaffer devotes several sections of "High-Impact Consulting" to GE and Motorola, both companies which have been regarded as admirable role models until their recent stumbles. One Motorola example, which is not from Schaffer's book, is particularly instructive. In February 1999, a Senior Vice-President (who shall remain anonymous) gave a speech describing one of Motorola's high-profile projects. Much of what this executive described is highly consistent with the high-impact paradigm - a focus on action rather than producing voluminous documents, placing a higher value on "commitment" than on detailed analysis, creating teams to address specific tasks and dissolving them once that task is accomplished, rapid-cycle pilot programs, and so forth. At the time of the presentation, this particular project was so well regarded that the speaker described with pride his success in "evading the corporate antibodies." It was only later that his project, a \$5 billion dollar satellite telephone system called Iridium, was revealed as a colossal debacle that came crashing (literally!) down to earth.

Of course, it's not really fair to ascribe the Iridium project to High-Impact Consulting. There's no evidence that the high-impact discipline was ever used on the project, much less that it was the cause of such an enormous boondoggle. The Iridium project does, however, illustrate the danger of focusing exclusively on action and implementation, rather than taking some time to lay the appropriate groundwork.

Despite such criticisms, High-Impact Consulting has much to recommend it. Schaffer provides numerous case studies, step-by-step methodologies, and detailed questionnaires, which provide both persuasive education and practical tools. The focus on providing specific benefits to clients is welcome, particularly as the consulting industry struggles to regain its bearings. It provides an extremely useful resource for consultants whose professional pedigree is limited to extended large-scale assignments at the major consulting firms. It also provides much valuable information to executives who use consultants, including a series of very specific recommendations for selecting consultants, defining projects, managing consulting relationships, and managing the staff who work with consultants.

In summary, High-Impact Consulting is a worthy addition to any business bookshelf. Read it. Learn from it. Add Schaffer's high impact tools to your consulting toolbox. Your clients will benefit from the effort. Just don't forget to leave at least some room in your engagements for the big-picture work as well.