

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## When an External Consultant is Too Close to the Leader

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*Working in management studies and organization theory often means that we scholar practitioners spend a lot of time working as an external consultant. And there are ethics and expectations regarding the assumption of that role. But as many of us have experienced, I'm sure not everybody abides by the rules when the senior leader, the executive, is the one who personally chooses the consultant. Then, sometimes the members' trust and confidence could be at risk. And there may be political difficulties associated with raising concerns to the leader. So what are members to do?*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

Now, I want to start with the discussion of just the external pressures or the competitive pressures that leaders face, which sometimes can cause them to want to initiate change very, very quickly. You know, this could be in the form of a "stakeholder mandate." It could be in the form of a personal view towards the organization of wanting to change and shape it. But regardless, let's just take instances which are fairly commonplace. I believe that a leader comes into an organization wanting to make change, and wanting to make it change quickly. How does a leader go about doing it?

Well, this is where external consultants can come in. You know, you have an external consultant who is going to come in with an independent view, demonstrate their skills. They're going to help enable the change that the leader wants to initiate. That's sort of the setting. Now, the question is, is how do you get the consultant started and what happens when the consultant actually enters the organization? Private sector organizations have a lot of freedom when they get to choose an external consultant compared to a public sector organization, where there's a lot of rules and regulations associated with those choices.

And so I'm going to focus on a public sector example and two cases in particular in which a leader brought in an external consultant, one in which the leader personally had some sort of a professional relationship prior to the consulting relationship. I want to emphasize that these two cases happened quite some time ago and that the rules about contracting for consultation have changed significantly in the United States since the time that these two incidents occurred. But I think there's these two stories are still very illustrative of the challenges. What happens if the external consultant comes in and doesn't necessarily act in a fully ethical and professional fashion, causing the organization to rebel? In the case of when the leader has personal or professional relationships with the consultant, in both cases that I'm going to tell you about, I was the point of

contact. I was the internal consultant who was placed as a handler for the external consultants in question. This is kind of interesting because in both cases, I ended up having to go basically to the leader and say that this person that you brought in needs to be fired or terminated. I've frequently referred to these two as the two days I would rather forget.

But let me run you through the cases. OK. So the first one occurred very long time ago, and I was a rather junior officer at the time. So, you know, as an internal consultant, I was fulfilling the role of internal consultant. I was working as a low ranking officer in the direct report to a senior leader, and the leader came in and wanted to initiate change on a very, very short timeline about a few months into the command. They brought in through what we would call a "sole source" contract, which is essentially that rather than opening up a contract for bid, you basically put in justification to say that, OK, this particular consultant is the only one who could do this job. And so through the mechanism, a particular consultant was brought in and was hired. Purpose was to facilitate a series of top management team forums to try to get at what are the problems of the organization and how do we go about getting everything fixed? The primary role was facilitation, strategic plan development, and a couple of other things. And then follow up. The idea of the contract was -- you know -- we set up the plan and then we execute the plan. And then this consultant would come back and facilitate follow-on sessions once the effort, the change effort was essentially underway. The issue is not the facilitation of the contractor did a very, very good job getting people to talk and having negotiating and doing all of that kind of stuff to setup a participative environment where everybody's voice was heard, that basically the facilitation was good.

However, it was outside of the facilitation room that there were there were issues. This particular consultant was fond of basically throwing the commander's name around in order to get things done in the consultant's favor. The consultant was very demanding, not just on me (the handler), but also on others in my group and had also angered the organization's lawyer and the contracting officers by making demands that were, one would say, would be unreasonable. And then the final straw in that particular case was a claim on intellectual property. Now, in the public sector, of course, just about all of the intellectual property generated is part of the public domain. But this particular consultant was trying to claim basically trying to make intellectual property claims based on the format of the report, and some of the other intricacies of the products being developed, which really was, you know, very, very shaky. It was an obvious effort to try to preserve the consultant's individual branding, but it was wholly inappropriate in a public sector organisation setting. And it was very easy for us to work around it.

This came to a head and I decided it was time to act. So as the handler, I only had so much of the story. I mean, I knew what I had seen. So I first engaged the lawyer. I engaged the contracting officer, engaged with several staff directors, ultimately enlisted the number two in the organization to ultimately host a meeting where a whole bunch of us around the table were going to make a case to say that this contractor needed to change behavior or we need to find a path to terminate the contract.

The meeting actually was set up, but it was a rather uncomfortable one. It didn't seem like any of us wanted to say anything except for me. But basically, it wound up being the lawyer who took the

floor, made the case. And ultimately the decision was to allow the contract to lapse. So the plan would be written and then all of the follow on stuff? Nah, we don't need it. We cut it off right there. Of course, the contractor could read between the lines and knew that well, you know, because the contract was being allowed to lapse, that this was a negative signal to the contractor. This was handled very well. I don't think that there were any bad feelings, but it definitely was a very uncomfortable time for me because it took a lot of engagement, a lot of distraction from my own duties to be able to set this up.

The second case is very, very similar. The difference being that instead of some seasoned outside consultant, the leader actually chose someone who was a former boss and mentor to come in to be the consultant. It was a personality match, basically very, very similar in personality and temperament, in world views. I mean, they basically saw a lot of things in common.

It very much was an opportunity to bring in some assistance to try to help an organization that was in need of change. You know, it sounded good. There was a clear external mandate that the organization needed to transform. And this consultant was particularly brought in to kind of be... I don't want to say an agitator, that sounds pejorative, but but basically a disruptor. I mean, you know, this was somebody who had a lot of innovation in the background and was going to come in and basically be the wrecking ball to get things going again. This time I was a little older, but still quite junior in this case. I was, again, the handler. And so my responsibilities were to help.

Now, there are many ways, many ways in which you can be a disruptor or a wrecking ball. The proper way to do it, of course, is to do so in a manner that exposes the organization's flaws and convinces the organization's members to acknowledge them. It should occur through building mutual trust and quality analysis of the organization and build evidence to make the case that change was needed. Unfortunately, the other way to be a wrecking ball is what this consultant's approach was, which was essentially a scorched earth strategy, which involved badgering. And I mean, I wouldn't call it abuse. I don't know that everybody would agree with me, but I felt it was a bit degrading in a way that this consultant treated people.

It was sort of like coming in saying you're all messed up and no matter what it is, you just cannot stay the way you are. We're going to totally tear you up and I'll badger you -- Just like in the other case. This consultant made the egregious, in my view, mistake of invoking the commander's name in order to get one's way. So it was also making many excessive demands, especially given that the organization was busy -- still had a lot of things, you know, still a lot of things on its plate. And he wasn't in any way interested in spending time to observe. It was strictly to intervene. So then the trust barrier became an issue.

And so I saw this as potentially being, you know, reaching a point where nobody was willing to give this person the time of day, but they had to because they knew that the that the leader was pushing for for change. The final straw was when, by happenstance, a former handler of the same consultant from another organization came in and visited. Just, you know, this was not planned in any way. This person was coming in from a wholly different capacity, doing something else at the organization. I found out about it and found out that there was a connection and decided to investigate and just, you know, sit down with this handler, find out what what happened in the previous organization. And it turned out that [basically, despite much of the promise made by the]

consultant, it was kind of shaky. The consultant had done the same thing in the previous organization. But ultimately, there was no real deliverable. There was nothing in return except for bad will. There were questions. You know, this there actually was not sufficient beneficial to continuing a relationship with this consultant.

So I basically pulled out the playbook from the previous incident and eventually led to a meeting with Lee with leadership led by the lawyer to basically present this case to the commander and say that, you know, we need to either end this relationship or we need to do something vastly different in this particular case. The decision was to do something vastly different. He was given a much more senior handler. And the rules of engagement and the outcomes were reshaped. But the consultant remained.

Turned out that I left that organization later that same calendar year. And during my first staff meeting in the new organization... Is kind of amusing! The chief of staff, who was a two star general, had announced that he had been contacted by the same consultant who offered help. And turning to the audience for information about, you know, who knows about this person, etc.. It gave me the opportunity to stand up and basically declare that we did not require his services.

So as I went through my doctoral program later, I took a course in consulting and everything I learned in that course. And I really credit Dr. David Schwandt, who was the teacher from George Washington University, who taught this course in consulting, which is one of the ones that I remember very, very well.

And I wish I had the opportunity to take it before I became an internal consultant myself. Everything that he taught in consulting? I looked back at these two cases and said everything was violated. Everything that was proper about consultation were violated in these two cases. What this tells me is that, you know, perhaps in a way in the olden days, we had kind of fallen into a habit by which the handler of an external consultant was really just nothing more than a gofer and that there were no no real responsibilities except for keep the external consultant happy. But in reality, there is a critical role for the handler. And the handler is an internal consultant. If the handler has a responsibility to be the first eyes on target in the organization, to make sure that when the consultant is away from the leader outside of the leader's view, that the consultant is fulfilling the terms of the contract in a way that benefits the organization and not just makes the leader happy. They cannot be a mere collateral duty of a purely administrative nature. It's got to be a proper position of advisement that the leader has to have trust in the handler to do the right thing. I'm not saying that I didn't have that trust, but I don't think that in all cases, the senior leader expects the handler to do anything more than, you know, just basically assist the external consultant. They assume that things are going to go OK. And I think I surprised both of these commanders when I did. But I'm very proud and honored to say that both commanders were willing to listen. They acknowledged that there was that problems were happening and that they took what I felt was appropriate action.

So I can see how in both cases it could have been a lot worse. There's a lot in common, a lot that I that resonated with me when we did the Talking about organizations podcast episode on whistleblowers, the Alfred Book in Episode 45. I'll have that link to my site. It's a lot of the same concerns, you know, is the leader going to actually listen to the one telling truth to power? It's a concern.

I think this is another area where we do need to arm our internal consultants with the right attitude, the right tools, the right perspective, and that, you know, they have a crucial role in being on the front line to make sure that the external consultant is doing what we ask of them and that they're doing so in a way that benefits the organization and that there's good communication and understanding of what the boundaries are, especially when it comes to what authorities are actually vested. The consultant, the unethical practice of invoking the [leader's name] is one that just can't be tolerated, shouldn't be tolerated, and it shouldn't be expected. And good consultants don't do that. So we want to make sure that those handlers that are properly armed for the responsibility, because it is a sensitive topic when you're talking about a case where there's an existing professional relationship between the leader and an external consultant brought in, you know, there's a sensitivity to that that everybody has to appreciate. Ultimately, we have to think about what does it take to do the right thing?

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**

**TOM GALVIN**