



Tips for a Successful Consultant Engagement

RoadMap provides expert assistance for clients seeking to strengthen organizational performance. RoadMap consultants can provide a number of services including succession planning, strategic planning, program evaluation, board development, coaching for Executive Directors or secondary leaders, financial management consultation and financial literacy training as well as fundraising development assistance. The program offers approximately 200 hours of consultant time over a 12-month period.

To help clients work successfully with a RoadMap consultant, we offer the following tips. While these tips are tailored to the RoadMap Program, much of it is applicable to hiring any consultant to help with organizational development issues.

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Note: Feel free to contact Emily Goldfarb, RoadMap Director, emily@roadmapconsulting.org, or Michelle Foy, RoadMap Program Manager, michelle@roadmapconsulting.org to discuss your organization's situation and to address any issues that arise during your work with a RoadMap consultant. The RoadMap staff and all the consultants on the RoadMap team maintain confidentiality regarding the work they do with your organization.

1. Understand when and why to seek a consultant's assistance

RoadMap consultants act primarily as facilitators who work with your group to understand and help frame the issues you are confronting and to guide your organization's stakeholders in discussions to address key questions related to strategy or future plans. A RoadMap consultant won't necessarily bring the answer to your problem(s) but can help you identify a range of possible solutions and select from among them.

A RoadMap consultant can help your group build its capacity. The consultant will:

- Provide expertise or insights to complement existing staff resources;
- Facilitate your organization's focus on a set of (often complex and interlocking) issues that may require resolution to enable the organization to operate well;
- Coordinate or motivate a team to complete a project;
- Build skills and confidence of staff and board;
- Provide objectivity in analyzing a situation or issue;
- Increase credibility for the process;
- Encourage participation of stakeholders (who are sometimes more open or willing to express their opinions with outside facilitation or in a confidential conversation); and
- Bring technical expertise and knowledge of common problems, as well as a variety of possible solutions, best practices or relevant research in the field.

A consultant should support, not substitute your efforts to address the issue at hand. Consider asking possible consultants how s/he will share knowledge to leave behind new skills and analytical tools once the job is done.

In addition, RoadMap consultants have particular experience working with social justice groups that may have characteristics similar to your organization. According to groups who have benefited from the program, the experience that RoadMap consultants have with culturally similar organizations seems to be one of the most valuable and reassuring aspects of our program.

2. Outline your organization's needs with respect to management and governance

List the issues you hope to address with the consultant. Then sort them into short-term and long-term items. Use the lists below to help articulate broadly the type of work you intend to undertake, in order to determine the skills and experience you may need from the consultant.

The following are examples of projects appropriate for a RoadMap consultant:

- Organizational assessment
- Strategic planning, long-term program planning
- Updating the mission statement and/or vision of the organization
- Evaluation and documentation
- Skills development – financial literacy, human resources skills, fundraising

- Leadership coaching and mentoring
- Board development, governance issues
- Organizational restructuring
- Fund development strategies
- Succession planning and leadership transition

Be clear which tasks the consultant will do

Consider what the organization’s staff can do on its own and what it will need consultant guidance to accomplish. You will be able to do more with the allotted RoadMap consultant hours and, at the same time develop capacity and skills among your staff, if you are careful to ask the consultant to guide you, rather than to do the work for you.

List the skills or qualities that you seek in the consultant, as well as the roles you expect the consultant to play. These might include:

- Facilitating small and/or large groups
- Analyzing issues and outlining a range of potential solutions
- Interviewing internal stakeholders
- Interviewing external stakeholders
- Writing memos for internal use throughout the process
- Writing materials for public use
- Skills training on specific topics
- Coaching one or more individuals

3. Determine organization’s readiness to engage in the project

In addition to defining specific goals for a RoadMap consultant, you should think about whether your organization is ready for outside assistance: Do you have the staff time and energy needed to focus on the particular issues at this time? Can the Executive Director and other organizational leaders engage consistently in the project to ensure buy-in and follow through? What are the pros and cons of working on this at this time? Are there competing priorities or crisis-conditions that will affect staff or board members’ ability to focus on the project? RoadMap can help you assess organizational readiness to ensure that the project can be successful.

4. Set goals and expectations

Once you have narrowed the issues to be investigated, it is important to set concrete goals. These should be explicit and shared between the organization and the consultant. Goals may shift as the consultant assesses the situation in more detail or as the work progresses. Any shifts should be articulated explicitly. Clarifying goals is an important starting point and will

establish a common understanding of expected outcomes as you monitor your progress over time.

- Goals: What will be accomplished? What will be different in your organization as a result of this project? How will the organization measure success? How will it evaluate the consultant's role and project outcomes?
- Timeline: How many hours do you think will be required to accomplish the project? What is your target date for completion? Are there other benchmarks between the start and end of the project that will help you RoadMap a timeline? Are there specific deadlines, related meetings, retreats or Board actions that need to be taken into account with regard to the timeline?
- Team: Who will be involved in selecting the consultant? Who should be on the Project Team that will be involved in doing the work? Who will serve as the liaison or primary contact person with the consultant?

5. Identify consultant choices and conduct interviews

- a) Prepare a Written Request for Assistance. Review and follow the guidelines provided.
- b) One of the RoadMap Co-Directors will contact you to discuss your request in greater detail and match your request with two or more potential RoadMap consultants. Feel free to review the resume and client list of each possible RoadMap consultants provided to you. The RoadMap Co-Director can help you think through questions that will determine the scope of work you will undertake.
- c) Interview more than one RoadMap consultant. This offers you the chance to explore different approaches, techniques and skill sets to help you refine your understanding of the situation your organization is confronting, while simultaneously allowing you to compare the candidates.
- d) In some instances, the RoadMap Co-Director may recommend a team of consultants to meet your organization's needs. You may discuss the pros and cons of a team approach with the RoadMap Co-Director. (See note about teams on final page.)
- e) If you are not satisfied with a RoadMap consultant's work at any time, contact the RoadMap Co-Director to see if the challenges can be resolved or if RoadMap can assign a different consultant.

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING CONSULTANTS

The goal is to determine if the consultant is a good fit for your organization and for the task at hand. Try to define the challenges your group is facing; describe the background, expertise, and services you're seeking; and characterize the kind of relationship you want to cultivate with the consultant. Try to envision the timeline. You may find that you need a consultant to help articulate the issues you want to address, the scope of work and the timeline. (The RoadMap Co-Director can also help you with the initial task of defining the work.)

Even though your thinking may evolve as a result of the interviews, try to ask each candidate the same questions so that you can establish a fair standard for comparison. As you interview possible consultants, pay attention to their specific answers and to their personal manner and professional style. Watch for things such as listening skills, insight, objectivity, cultural competency, and an ability to communicate clearly.

Typical Agenda for Your Interview with the Consultant (allow about one hour for the call)

a) Share background information and goals of the project

- Explain your job title and role in the organization.
- Review the written request you submitted to RoadMap.
- Describe the project expectations, goals and timeline.
- Outline the history, symptoms and causes of the issue at hand. Describe what you think are the organization needs at this time.
- Describe any other current or previous consultant involvement with these issues.
- Explain what you have tried and what ideas need more attention at this time.
- Answer the consultant's questions about the organization or scope of work.

b) Review the consultant's experience and approach

- Review the consultant's resume, client list and familiarity with the field.
- Ask the consultant what s/he perceives to be her/his strengths & experience relevant to this project. What creative ideas or processes does the consultant recommend using in this project? Listen for any insights the consultant offers.
- Ask the consultant to describe an unsuccessful experience s/he may have had and what s/he learned about the practice as a result. Share any unsuccessful experiences the organization has had with consultants and what you learned. Or share what worked and why you think it worked.
- Determine if the consultant has an understanding of the cultures present in your organization. Is there an awareness of the ethnic traditions, race, social dynamics and world perspectives that are represented by staff, constituents, board members and other stakeholders?

c) Clarify next steps

- Explain your internal process to the consultant, including when and if you will be checking references and when you expect to be back in touch with the RoadMap Co-Director regarding your decision.
- Find out if the consultant has time to meet the goals of this project on time.

6. Check consultant's references

You are looking for a good match in terms of skill, sensitivity, and experience. In each case, call the person who supervised the consultant's work directly (which will usually be the Executive Director or a board member). Consider asking for a full client list to see the breadth of their work. You may want to check in with clients who are not on the consultant's formal list of references.

Guiding questions for references:

Ask references what impact the consultant's work had on the organization. Begin your talk with an open-ended question related to your project goals. Open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." For example:

- We're thinking about hiring "Joanne Expert" to train our board in fundraising. I understand she did some similar work for you. How did that work out?
- Did the consultant quickly grasp the needs of your organization and its underlying challenges?
- Was work completed on time and on schedule? Did the consultant work at an appropriate pace?
- Did you reach your stated goals?
- Were changes in the goals or work plan properly negotiated? Can you give any examples?
- How did the consultant's actions affect the board and staff?
- How did the consultant treat you, your staff and your board? Did people like and respect her/him?
- What do you think are the consultant's best qualities? What limitations or challenges did you experience in your process?
- Would you hire the consultant again? Would you work with her/him differently?

7. Select the consultant and coordinate with RoadMap

Once you identify a consultant who you think will be a good match with your organization and needs, notify the RoadMap Co-Director so that the contract can be approved. From that point on you and the consultant will develop your relationship directly. Your organization has the right to adjust the scope of work and direction of the project according to your needs. The RoadMap Co-Director will check in occasionally with both you and the consultant to make sure things are progressing smoothly and that you are satisfied. The RoadMap Co-Director may

offer guidance to you and/or your consultant to support the achievement of your capacity building goals. Feel free to contact the RoadMap Co-Director at any time if you have questions or concerns. Like your consultant, the RoadMap Co-Director will maintain confidentiality and will not inform FACT about project details or issues that emerge.

8. Be prepared -- What to cover in the first visit(s) with the consultant

At the outset, it will help if you provide the consultant with background materials.

Background Documents

- The request to RoadMap for assistance or a summary of the project if it was subsequently revised;
- The organization's mission statement and any current public materials;
- A board and staff list, and chart of relationships;
- The current budget, financial statements and tax return from the previous year;
- Any documents related to the consulting project; and
- A sample grant proposal about the organization's programs

Getting Started: Orientation Meeting with Organizational Leadership

The most important goals of your first face-to-face visit with the consultant are:

- Get to know one another;
- Begin to build trust; and
- Orient the consultant to the organization and its people. Help the staff feel comfortable with the consultant. (Being clear about expectations and timeline will help the staff and any other stakeholders involved to feel comfortable.)

If you are working with a consultant long distance, consider dedicating one to two full days on-site for the first visit. Structure the time so that the consultant and staff begin to get to know each other. If you are using a local consultant, you can spread these visits out over time. This orientation may take place in a fairly informal way, or may start with a formal assessment process (via a form, interviews, surveys, focus groups, etc.) and may include a local tour so the consultant can have a better understanding of the work "outside your walls".

Even if another person is identified as the primary liaison to the consultant, it is imperative that the Executive Director be involved in the initial meetings, the development of the consultant work plan and the scope of the work. The Executive Director also needs to genuinely "cheerlead" this work with the rest of the staff and board, stressing its importance and the organizational commitment to the process; and the ED should be in contact with the consultant to check in from time to time.

First Working Meeting with the Project Team or Committee

- Introduce the consultant and briefly review his/her qualifications and experience.
- Review the project goals, timeline and major project steps (the timeline and next steps may get more detailed and formalized over 2-3 meetings/discussions).

- Review background information related to the issues at hand.
- Clarify the role of the liaison to the consultant and other key staff roles that will be important to the success of this project and the planning team.
- Clarify decision-making processes.
- Ask your consultant about how s/he manages confidentiality regarding sensitive discussions. Understand the “RoadMap firewall” and role of the RoadMap Co-Director.
- Outline any homework to be done between meetings, including documents to prepare or share.
- Establish best ways to communicate (email, phone, conference calls, etc.).
- Set a follow-up meeting and key agenda items.

9. Produce a written scope of work with the consultant

Generally after the first or second visit, priorities are established, and the goals and the structure of the consulting relationship become clear. The consultant will take the lead in drafting a scope of work, which is reviewed, revised and approved by the organizational liaison and the ED. The approved scope of work should be submitted to the RoadMap Co-Director within two months of the initiation of the project. The RoadMap Co-Director will accept it or provide feedback, including suggested modifications. This is the basis upon which the RoadMap Co-Director and the funder will allocate an appropriate amount of the total capacity building budget to your project.

A scope of work should include:

- The goals of the project or results you hope to achieve (against which the consultant's work will be evaluated);
- Quantifiable parameters such as the number of people to be interviewed or the estimated number of meetings;
- A work plan outlining the likely steps at which progress will be monitored, the overall proposed timeline, and the responsibilities of the organization and the consultant in meeting the project goals;
- An outline of the technical and human resources the consultant will need to complete the work, like mailing lists, historical documentation, financial information, or staff and board time and participation;
- A list of the work products or “deliverables” the consultant will produce, such as a strategic plan, written report, summary of research findings, meeting agendas, or employee handbook;
- A written agreement regarding joint or separate ownership of any work products. For example, if the project will draw from a training curriculum, templates or other resources that the consultant brings into the project, clarify whether these will remain the property of the consultant. Items created specifically for this project might remain the property of the organization; and
- A statement of the projected hours and costs. If costs are estimates, the contract should state terms under which the consultant can exceed the estimates.

10. Tips on working with consultant teams and with coaches

Peer Learning

The RoadMap team includes consultants with a wide variety of backgrounds, skills and experience that we think is usually broad enough to match your organization's needs and timeline. The pool of consultants is convened annually in person and on a quarterly basis by phone to share tools, resources and build consultants' understanding of common organizational issues. The team serves as a peer learning forum and exchange for each other. On occasion, a RoadMap consultant may also ask others in the pool for support, resources or problem-solving advice regarding a specific project. We will endeavor to maintain appropriate levels of confidentiality to protect the organization and the individuals.

Working with a RoadMap Team

If your organization needs assistance in several different areas, it may be appropriate to work with a team of RoadMap consultants. You may request a team, or the RoadMap Co-Director may recommend this. If you choose to work with more than one RoadMap consultant it is important to be clear about the distinct roles each will play and to specify goals for each piece of work and stay aware of consultant hours. You will also want to define how communication and coordination will be managed between the organization, the consultants and the RoadMap Co-Director. Many of our consultants do have experience working with one another.

Working with Coaches

Coaching focuses on providing one-on-one support to address organizational issues and/or provide individual skill building. The Client-Coach relationship requires an even greater degree of trust and confidentiality than the typical organizational consultant relationship. In the coaching relationship, the client is the individual who defines the goals of the coaching sessions. In the organizational consultant relationship, the client is the organization overall, and the consultant will endeavor to help the overall organization not a single individual. Sometimes, the Executive Director or other staff may have both types of relationships (with both a coach and an organizational consultant.) It is important for all concerned – the coaching client, the staff, board or other stakeholders - to have a clear understanding of the purpose and goals of the different types of intervention.

If your RoadMap project involves both a coach and an organizational consultant it is important to outline clear pathways for communication that respect these different roles. Each situation is very particular and the RoadMap consultants will make every effort to provide sensitive, direct and respectful feedback to ensure that the team works together effectively.

For example:

- The Consultant may inform the Coach about insights into organizational issues so that the coach can follow up in individual coaching sessions;
- The Consultant may encourage the client to raise a particular issue in coaching; and

- The Coach may inform the Consultant about a relevant issue and give guidance about how this may be brought into the organizational discussions with the permission of the staff person being coached.

11. Manage the consultant relationship throughout the project

It is important that you maintain regular communication and check in on the progress of the overall project and timeline with your consultant. Build a relationship with the consultant characterized by open, honest discussion and reciprocal feedback. Withholding of knowledge or opinions by either party will reduce the potential benefit to the organization. The team liaison's role is critical to a good partnership.

Tips for Managing your Relationship

- Within a week or so of each team meeting, review what progress was made, whether there were internal dynamics that require attention, follow-up tasks to assign or remind people about.
- Discuss emerging issues or changing conditions.
- Decide on next steps – confirm meeting dates, homework, etc.
- Check in frequently to make sure the project is on schedule and that tasks are being done to your satisfaction. Review the scope of work, timeline and billable hours on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis.
- Talk through concerns, questions, and problems as soon as they crop up.
- Remember the meter is running on the funds allocated for your project; use the consultant's time wisely. Show up on time. Don't reschedule meetings at the last minute. Do your homework.
- Make time in the final meeting to do an evaluation with the consultant.

Project Reporting to the Funder: Grantees may be responsible for reporting to the funder supporting the capacity building initiative. Please review funder guidelines on this matter. RoadMap will also provide an evaluation form at the outset of the engagement with your consultant. You may also choose to communicate directly with the funder regarding the progress and impact of the project at your own level of comfort.

The designated RoadMap Co-Director will be available as a resource to ensure that the relationship is going well and that the organization's needs are being met. She will check in with the organization and the consultant during the project, and you should feel free to ask for guidance as needed. There is no magic formula to ensure that you find the perfect consultant and that they perform to your expectations. Attention to the key elements highlighted above will help you achieve your goals, hire the right consultant at the right time for the right reason, arrive at agreements about the scope and goals of the work, and manage your relationship with the consultant.

Good luck! Here's to a stronger, more sustainable organization with greater impact!

Acknowledgements and Resources

This article has drawn upon the experience of the French American Charitable Trust's Management Assistance Program and excerpts from the following sources:

["Working with a Consultant or Technical Assistance Provider: A Resource List"](#) This listing from the Foundation Center provides consultant directories and tips on hiring and working with consultants.

[Succeeding with Consultants: Self-Assessment for the Changing Nonprofit](#) By Barbara Kibbe and Fred Setterberg, The Foundation Center, 1992.

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