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Chris Cardona  
*TCC Group*

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# Balancing Content and Process Expertise in the Practice of Foundation Consulting

Chris Cardona, Ph.D., TCC Group

*Keywords:* Expertise, consulting, philanthropy, management

## Key Points

- Despite foundations' frequent recourse to consultants, little, if anything, has been written on the expertise required of foundation consultants and how they cultivate it. This article looks at the types of expertise that these consultants bring to their work and for which their clients hire them.
- This expertise falls into three categories: process expertise, or what the consultant does with the client; content expertise, or what the grantmaker does; and hybrid expertise, consultant processes that are their own subject areas.
- This article also offers examples of how content, process, and/or hybrid expertise might combine to address particular foundation needs, and incorporates the perspectives of 12 consultants to philanthropy, ranging from solo practitioners to members of large firms.

## Introduction

The practice of foundation consulting is prevalent, yet poorly understood. One such dimension of this practice – the types of expertise that foundation consultants bring to their work and for which their clients hire them – is the focus of this article.

The Foundation Center conducted research in 2014 on how and for what purposes foundations hire consultants (McGill, Henry-Sanchez, Wolcheck, & Reibstein, in press). Of the more than 1,000 foundations that responded to the survey, 34 percent had used a consultant in the last two years, a figure that rises to 85 percent among

those with annual giving of \$50 million or more. Thirty-six percent of respondents had hired a consultant two or three times during that period. In terms of expertise, the most popular uses of consultants were for technology/IT (41 percent) and communications/marketing (29 percent), functions that are regularly outsourced in many organizations. But foundations responding to the survey also sought other forms of expertise in which consultants to foundations often specialize, such as evaluation (22 percent), strategic planning (21 percent), facilitation (21 percent), program development (16 percent), grants management (15 percent), and governance (11 percent).

Despite foundations' frequent recourse to consultants, little, if anything, has been written on the expertise required of foundation consultants and how they cultivate it. GrantCraft (Ryan & Jaffe, 2005), Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (Woodwell, 2011), and the Center for Effective Philanthropy (Buteau, Buchanan, & Chu, 2010) have identified specific forms of expertise and professional practices that grantmakers require. Foundation head Karl Stauber (2010) has considered in a past issue of *The Foundation Review* whether philanthropy can be judged a profession. While expertise has been widely studied and its role in consulting has been examined in depth, we have little guidance on the expertise of foundation consultants.

As one such consultant, I have observed a difference between content expertise – knowing a particular field or program area – and process

expertise – knowing how to take a client through a series of steps leading to a given outcome. Balancing the two has been central to my practice and that of the firm at which I work. As I have read further on the topic, reflected on my experience and that of my colleagues, and spoken with some of my fellow consultants, I’ve come to a more nuanced understanding of the types of expertise involved in consulting to foundations. I share that perspective here with the hope that it promotes discussion among consultants and between consultants and foundations about how to develop more effective consulting relationships.

In writing this article, I drew on the experience of my employer, TCC Group, a consulting firm that has for more than 35 years provided a range of consulting services to different types of foundations. I accessed sources on consulting in business and nonprofits and on expertise in psychology and management studies. I incorporated the perspectives of 12 consultants to philanthropy, ranging from solo practitioners to members of large firms (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2), whose insights were central in shaping my argument. Finally, I benefited from very helpful editorial and review comments on a draft of this article.

### Framing the Question

To understand what kinds of expertise are relevant for foundation consulting, we need to understand the role of expertise in consulting practice more generally.

Expertise is but one of the elements of successful consulting relationships, and the literature offers myriad models for conceptualizing these elements. Across these models, expertise is often associated with a one-way transfer of knowledge between consultant and client, and both the nature of this knowledge and the effectiveness of the transfer are investigated. Several typologies (Maister, 2005; Canato & Giangreco, 2011; Lukas 1998) contrast the expert role with a more collaborative or learning role, in which consultant and client are co-creators of knowledge. Another approach (Nikolova & Devinnay, 2011; Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, 1996) is much more critical of the consulting relationship, seeing it

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as primarily rhetorical and not grounded in a solid base of knowledge. This approach mistrusts consultants, viewing them as little better than hucksters.

We can call these, in a variation on Nikolova and Devinnay, the expert model, the partner model, and the huckster model.

### *The Expert Model: One-Way Transfer of Information*

This is perhaps the most common understanding of the consultant: a technical expert who comes in and tells the client how to do things better. Canato and Giangreco (2011) identify four variations on this consultant role: information sources, standard setters, knowledge brokers, and knowledge integrators. All require the ability to manage and communicate information from multiple sources and point to the relevance of making connections across sectors.

Maister (2005) recognizes three forms of value for which clients hire consultants generally: expertise (what they know), experience (what they have done), and execution (what they can deliver). He posits that these matter to a different extent at different points in the evolution of a consulting firm. Firms evolve from a focus on providing expertise to developing and selling more standardized procedures. In selecting a consultant, foundations may wish to consider whether they need, in Maister’s (1993) terms, “big brains,” “gray hair,” or “procedure.”

A bit further afield, Rich (2004) zeroes in on the role of expertise at policy-focused think tanks, and finds that these entities often intervene too

*In the partner model, client and consultant together create the knowledge that the client needs. They engage in a back and forth characterized by mutual trust.*

late in the process to have real influence. Once a policy problem has coalesced, it can be difficult if not impossible for expertise to influence how policymakers address it. Early intervention is critical and can be facilitated by high levels of trust. This suggests the limitations of the expert model and points toward the virtues of an alternative, the partner model.

*The Partner Model: Co-creation of Knowledge*

In the partner model, client and consultant together create the knowledge that the client needs. They engage in a back and forth characterized by mutual trust. In this vein, Schaffer (2002) identifies five frequent flaws in consulting engagements and their respective solutions:

1. defining a project in terms of the consultant's process (instead of the client's results);
2. not gauging readiness for change (instead of shaping the pace of change contemplated);
3. taking on too broad a scope (instead of aiming for smaller-scale, iterated wins);
4. shifting responsibility back and forth between client and consultant (instead of sharing it all along the way); and
5. as a result of the above, overusing consulting time (instead of leveraging it effectively).

Lukas (1998) focuses on consulting for nonprofits specifically, naming five roles that range on a spectrum from more consultant-centered to

more client-centered: advocate, expert, educator/trainer, catalyst, and reflector. In all these cases, the consultant tailors the approach to the needs of the client and assumes whatever role makes sense in that context. The expertise required is highly adaptive.

Block (1999) emphasizes the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of consulting, asserting that 50 percent of the relationship is interpersonal and not tied to intellectual factors like expertise. He emphasizes the importance of the consultant engaging "authentically," by reflecting back his or her own experience of the interaction to the client in real time. Such candor requires – and in Block's view, helps to build – high levels of trust. Both parties must engage actively and thoughtfully in the consulting relationship.

From the perspective of those doing the buying, Baumann et al. (1999) observe that as the nonprofit sector has grown, the industry of consulting to nonprofits has grown along with it. For these authors, there is reason to be cautious, because the incentives in nonprofit consulting relationships are problematic: often a third party, a funder, is paying for the services, and so the nonprofit does not own the relationship, and the consultant may feel his or her true client is the foundation. Kibbe and Setterberg (1992) emphasize the choices that nonprofit managers must make in selecting consultants. They distinguish good reasons to hire a consultant (a specific task to be done, a problem to be solved, or a need to motivate staff or board to enact a known solution) and "terrible" reasons to hire one (to treat them as fall guy, as hit man, as messiah, or as burden to impose on others).

These "terrible" reasons to hire a consultant suggest a darker side to the client-consultant relationship, which is embodied more fully in the huckster model.

*The Huckster Model: Selling Certainty in an Uncertain World*

Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) skewer "management gurus" who sell business advice to companies, often in the form of consulting.

They posit that in a globalizing world, uncertainty about business outcomes is increasing. Genuine insight is very hard to come by, yet the need to continually develop business leads management gurus to churn out ever more product, regardless of its value. Managers need to be more skeptical and selective consumers of management theory, so as not to be led astray by hucksters. In these authors' vision, the very nature of the business environment makes consulting characterized by partnership and based in legitimate expertise difficult if not impossible to achieve. Their analysis is stern, but they are short on prescriptions.

Nikolovna and Devinney (2011) take this skeptical view a step further. In contrast to expert and social-learning models, they identify a "critical model" in which knowledge is uncertain and the consultant must continually persuade the client of the consultant's value through rhetorical techniques. In this model, the very nature of consulting knowledge is "ambiguous and idiosyncratic," so consultants focus not on transferring a set body of knowledge, but on creating images, impressions, and metaphors that substitute for knowledge in clients' minds.

As a consultant, I find this perspective very bleak! But it contains an important kernel of truth: There is less certainty in the knowledge that is generated within philanthropy than many of us, consultants and funders alike, acknowledge or feel comfortable with. By elucidating the range of expertise that consultants bring, I hope to provide greater specificity about the type of knowledge that is in play in consulting relationships with foundations.

Ask any consultant to choose among these three models, and they'll all reach for the partner model. This is what we aspire to. But the reality is that expertise is something we are often called upon to provide. Clients do look to us for certain types of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and want us to transfer some to them. How do we think through the different types of expertise involved in foundation consulting, with a view

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toward embracing a partner model and avoiding a huckster model?

### Defining Expertise in Foundation Consulting

Where does expertise come from? Like the old joke about how to get to Carnegie Hall, the answer appears to be practice, practice, practice. K. Anders Ericsson and his colleagues (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007), from the perspectives of psychology and management, have summarized expertise in the phrase, "experts are always made, not born" (p. 115). They observe that there are no shortcuts to expertise and that cultivating it requires strong, steady mentoring and coaching. It is in part from their work that Malcolm Gladwell (2008) popularized the notion that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to acquire expertise. This stance has proved controversial (Szalavitz, 2013), and Gladwell has since clarified that he meant that expertise in "cognitively demanding fields" (Gladwell, 2013), which certainly applies to consulting.

To develop expertise in foundation consulting, then, requires intentional practice over a sustained period of time, with steady mentoring and coaching. But how do you know what to practice? What skills or knowledge are most important?

I posit three categories of expertise in foundation consulting: process, content, and hybrid. Process expertise is about what the consultant does with the client, content expertise is about what the grantmaker does, and hybrid expertise is about consultant processes that are their own subject

areas, i.e., that have a distinct body of knowledge, practices, and/or professional standards, such as strategic planning, capacity building, or evaluation. (See Table 1.)

The several types of process expertise relate to the practices of consultants and grantmakers that generate effective outcomes. Some of these processes are internally focused, involving the staff and board of the foundation. Others can be either internally or externally focused, involving outside stakeholders such as grantees and community members.

#### *Process Expertise: Internally Focused*

- *Problem framing/ideation:* Prioritizing information and/or problems and identifying the most effective framework within which to communicate information for decision-makers. This is one of the most subtle and valuable forms of process expertise. Often, a client – particularly one working on strategy – will come to a consultant with a host of issues and have trouble identifying where to start in addressing them. Problem-framing expertise enables consultants to ask the right questions, identify the real issues, and develop an approach – a framework, a set of activities, or a process of inclusion – to address them. Related to problem framing is ideation, the development of concepts that can help crystallize the real issues in an assignment.
- *Change management:* Assisting internal stakeholders in navigating organizational change, whether a shift in strategy; a change in operating model; the adoption of a new framework for evaluation, communications, or some other discipline; or the introduction of a new tool, such as a grants-management system. This skill helps leaders frame, communicate, support, monitor, and adapt change processes within their institutions.
- *Promoting culture shift:* Aiding an organization in establishing or changing its internal culture. Consultants with this skill help leaders appreciate the nuances of organizational culture, including how it is developed and embodied by their actions – not just their stated intentions – and that it requires reinforcement in ways large and small.

- *Grantmaking process:* Conceptualizing, designing, and executing grantmaking flows and processes. This requires familiarity with the day-to-day work of a program officer, the roles of different members of a grantmaking team, appropriate standards for “right sizing” grant review, and various grants-management systems and processes.

#### *Process Expertise: Externally or Internally Focused*

- *Facilitation:* Setting the agenda and managing discussion at a meeting of foundation stakeholders, whether internal (staff and/or board) or external (grantees, civic leaders, community members). Skilled facilitators tend to be comfortable with a wide variety of audiences, but likely specialize in particular groups, such as foundation staff, nonprofit boards, or grassroots leaders. Facilitation is one of the most portable forms of expertise and is a fairly standard tool of the trade for many foundation consultants.
- *Promoting collaboration:* Helping stakeholders, whether internal or external, to work together more effectively. There may be various reasons why foundation board and staff, staff in different departments, or staff and grantees do not collaborate well: lack of awareness, lack of knowledge, lack of will, or legacy of mistrust, mistreatment, or oppression. Consultants expert in promoting collaboration develop processes that allow groups to identify and overcome these challenges, and to sustain the ensuing connections.

#### *Content Expertise*

The several types of content expertise relate to the varied knowledge needed to deliver the substance of philanthropic work. These types are primarily defined by what the foundation does. The consultant’s expertise complements and/or enhances that of the foundation.

- *Sector knowledge:* An up-to-date and nuanced understanding of the history, evolution, trends,

TABLE 1 Categories of Expertise in Foundation Consulting

Category	Definition	Focus	Types of Expertise
Process	Practices that consultants and grantmakers themselves carry out to generate effective outcomes	What the consultant does with the client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitation: the ability to set the agenda for and manage the discussion of a meeting of foundation stakeholders, whether they are internal (staff and/or board) or external (grantees, civic leaders, community members)</li> <li>• Problem framing/ideation: the ability to prioritize information and/or problems and identify the most effective framework within which to communicate information for decision-makers</li> <li>• Promoting collaboration and connecting: the ability to help stakeholders, whether internal or external, work together more effectively</li> <li>• Change management: the ability to help internal stakeholders navigate a process of organizational change</li> <li>• Promoting culture shift: the ability to help an organization change its internal culture, either adopting an explicit one for the first time or intentionally shifting from one type of culture to another</li> <li>• Grantmaking process: the ability to conceptualize, design, and execute grantmaking flows and processes</li> </ul>
Content	The types of knowledge that are involved in delivering the substance of philanthropic work; the consultant's expertise complements, mirrors, parallels, builds on, and/or enhances that of the foundation	What the foundation does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sector knowledge: an up-to-date and nuanced understanding of the particular history, evolution, trends, and future of the philanthropic sector and its many components</li> <li>• Perspective from other industries: the ability to identify and bring forward relevant examples, frameworks, concepts, and practices from other sectors, such as business, government, the military, or academia</li> <li>• "Next door" knowledge: an in-depth understanding of how a field "adjacent" to the field in question operates</li> <li>• Place knowledge: a deep knowledge of the history, cultural norms, and institutional actors of a specific geographic area that is the client's focus</li> <li>• Macro perspective: a grasp of how macro social, economic, and cultural trends shape the work the client does</li> <li>• Subject-area knowledge: specialization in a particular domain of nonprofit activity, such as the arts, education, the environment, or health</li> </ul>
Hybrid	A process that has its own distinct body of knowledge, cultural norms, conceptual frameworks, and/or communities of practice	What the consultant does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic planning: the formulation or refinement of a mission, vision, values, goals, objectives, strategies, and benchmarks of success for a foundation's organization or program(s)</li> <li>• Evaluation: the rigorous, systematic assessment of the outcomes of foundation-funded work and/or of the foundation's own operations, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques</li> <li>• Capacity building: the process of systematically building the skills, knowledge, and networks of one or a group of nonprofit organizations through the application of tools grounded in a sound understanding of organizational development</li> <li>• Communications: articulating and disseminating strong, compelling messages targeted to appropriate audiences in a way that clearly advances the foundation's mission</li> <li>• Governance: designing and supporting the implementation of effective practices of the board of directors or trustees of a foundation, including board composition, onboarding, roles and responsibilities, relationships with staff, structure, and revitalization</li> <li>• Cultural competency: the ability to understand, respect, and engage productively with individuals and groups of different identities and backgrounds; and an appreciation of intersectionality, the overlapping social exclusions based on race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other social and individual characteristics</li> </ul>

*... [T]he consultant may not have intimate knowledge about the specific field of reproductive justice, but has worked extensively in a “next door” field such as LGBTQ justice, which has overlapping issues and concerns, as well as related dynamics. A similar form of expertise is the “insider/outsider” perspective, in which the consultant understands the kinds of issues that are likely to emerge in, say, movement building, but is enough outside of the movement to not be too invested in a particular approach or set of players.*

and future of the philanthropic sector and its many components: community, family, and large private foundations as well as corporate funders, grantmaking public charities, giving circles, donor-advised funds, and other philanthropic groups. Sector expertise extends to the very different issues facing institutions of all sizes: from small, unstaffed foundations to those with small to mid-size staffs and those with large staffs and/or multiple offices. Philanthropic sector knowledge also includes a similarly nuanced, though perhaps less extensive, understanding of the nonprofit sector and its history, evolution, trends, and future.

- *Perspective from other industries:* The ability to identify and offer relevant examples, frameworks, concepts, and practices from other sectors, such as business, government, the military, or academia. As Thaler Pekar of Thaler Pekar & Partners observes,

We don't live our lives in one sector. All of the business people with whom I work serve on nonprofit boards and volunteer, and all of the nonprofit people with whom I work are consumers. (See Appendix 1.)

It is well-known, for example, that human resources practices on diversity, equity, and inclusion are more advanced in the corporate and public sectors. A consultant able to share relevant examples from those sectors with philanthropic clients would provide valuable expertise.

- *“Next door” knowledge:* An in-depth understanding of a field adjacent to the client's field. For example, the consultant may not have intimate knowledge about the specific field of reproductive justice, but has worked extensively in a “next door” field such as LGBTQ justice, which has overlapping issues and concerns, as well as related dynamics. A similar form of expertise is the “insider/outsider” perspective, in which the consultant understands the kinds of issues that are likely to emerge in, say, movement building, but is enough outside of the movement to not be too invested in a particular approach or set of players. Fernando Chang-Muy of Solutions International observes,

With a farmworkers' organization, content and process intersect with being out of the mainstream. I don't have specific expertise with farmworker issues, but I have worked with organizations that work with them and I have knowledge of processes in working with Latinos. In helping to strengthen the organization's board, for example, it's useful that I know about Latino issues and how to draw out a woman who's not speaking and manage a male board member who won't stop speaking. (See Appendix 1.)

- *Place knowledge:* A deep knowledge of the history, cultural norms, and institutional actors of the specific geographic area in which the client focuses. The need for this type of expertise frequently arises in working with community foundations – does the consultant know that community well enough to help identify relevant stakeholders, have perspective on the potential success of initiatives that might have been tried before, and provide context on how the community foundation is perceived by local civic leaders and the broader public?
- *Macro perspective:* A grasp of how macro-level social, economic, and cultural trends shape the client’s work. For example, baby boomers delaying their expected retirement dates due to financial losses during the recession affect the pipeline of nonprofit executive directors and how living donors think about their time frame for giving. Marcy Hinand of Helicon Collaborative observes,

I think the content expertise we all need is knowledge of larger societal and economic and cultural trends. We do a disservice to nonprofit and foundation clients if we’re not constantly scanning the environment for those and thinking about their impact on our work. (See Appendix 1.)

- *Subject-area knowledge:* Specialization in a particular domain of nonprofit activity, whether general (such as the arts, education, the environment, or health), or specific (such as building cultural participation in the arts, early childhood education, climate change adaptation, or the social determinants of health). This includes familiarity not just with the topics, concepts, and terminology, but also with the relevant players and evolution of the field. This is what is most commonly understood as content expertise, but the above list demonstrates other types in this category.

Finally, several forms of expertise are both content and process. Each describes a process by which other outcomes are achieved, but each also has its distinct body of knowledge, cultural norms, conceptual frameworks, and/or communities

of practice. This list is far from exhaustive, but it represents some frequently used forms of hybrid expertise, several of which are referenced in the Foundation Center research cited at the outset of this article (McGill, et al., in press):

#### *Hybrid Expertise*

- *Strategic planning:* The formulation or refinement of mission, vision, values, goals, objectives, strategies, and benchmarks of success for a foundation’s organization or program(s). It is a means to achieving greater clarity and alignment among key stakeholders about the direction and priorities of the organization.
- *Evaluation:* The rigorous, systematic assessment of the outcomes of foundation-funded work and/or of the foundation’s own operations, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques. It is a means to understanding the ability of the foundation and its grantees to achieve their desired impact.
- *Capacity building:* The process of systematically building the skills, knowledge, and networks of one or a group of nonprofit organizations through the use of organizational development tools. It is a means to helping grantee organizations – and the funder itself – be more effective and efficient in pursuing their missions.
- *Communications:* Articulating and disseminating strong, compelling messages targeted to appropriate audiences in a way that clearly advances the foundation’s mission. This also includes the ability to manage internal communications. It is a means to establish and strengthen the foundation’s reputation, influence other actors in pursuit of the foundation’s mission, and create internal coherence and alignment.
- *Governance:* Designing and supporting implementation of effective practices of the board of directors or trustees of a foundation, including board composition, onboarding, roles and responsibilities, relationships with staff, structure, and revitalization. It is a means to

## Several forms of expertise are both content and process with their own bodies of knowledge and communities of practice ... such as strategic planning, evaluation, and communications.

ensuring effective, responsible, and sustainable leadership of the organization.

- *Cultural competency:* The capability to understand, respect, and engage productively with individuals and groups of different identities and backgrounds. This includes recognition of the limitations of one's own culturally shaped perspective and that one cannot assume fluency or familiarity with people of different backgrounds. Cultural competency is informed by the consultant's individual background and experience, which may include belonging to a group of people traditionally marginalized from the mainstream. Cultural competency also includes an appreciation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the overlapping social exclusions based on race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other social and individual characteristics; an informed analysis of how structural conditions, such as structural racism, shape life outcomes and social dynamics; and an "asset based" orientation that sees excluded groups as the agents of their own liberation, with the respectful and meaningful collaboration of allies.

The above typology conceptualizes the expertise involved in foundation consulting in terms of content, process, and hybrid. How do consultants strike a balance among these forms of expertise, and what are some of the hazards in doing so?

### Striking the Balance: Promise and Pitfalls

Different types of expertise are appropriate at different points in the life cycle of a foundation project. Recall Rich (2004), who emphasized early intervention as the key for experts seeking to influence the policy process. Similarly, projects that are in their early stages, requiring greater definition of goals and objectives, benefit from expertise in problem framing, whereas projects that are in the implementation stages benefit from expertise in change management. Foundations and the consultants they hire should be aware of what combination of expertise is appropriate at a given point in the evolution of a project.

Below are examples of how content, process, and/or hybrid expertise might combine to address particular foundation needs:

- *Design a strategy in a new area.* A combination of content and process experts may help identify and prioritize opportunities effectively.
- *Question assumptions and choices.* This may require a process expert who has depth in one area, even if it's not the foundation's specific area, as well as the wherewithal to probe the client's assumptions.
- *Increase bandwidth.* Foundation staff may know what to do, but can't make the time. In such a case, they may need a content expert who's skilled at project management and understands the internal working of foundations very well.
- *Resolve disagreements among staff or between staff and board.* A process expert in organizational dynamics who also understands internal dynamics of foundations may be needed.
- *Improve the efficiency of internal processes.* In such a case, a process expert who is well-versed in grantmaking and in change management is essential; subject-area knowledge is less important. In such cases, the consultant should be grounded in a relevant hybrid discipline, such as organizational development.

In these cases, a balanced combination of content, process, and hybrid expertise is desirable. However, it is possible to get the balance wrong, leading the client to receive suboptimal service. What are the consequences when a consultant has too much or too little process, content, or hybrid expertise for the situation?

When hiring consultants who are primarily content experts but lack process or hybrid expertise, foundations risk selecting:

- *consultants who think they know more than the client.* The consultants I interviewed emphasized the importance of humility, plus the ability to listen to clients' needs and meet them where they are. While this is a basic tenet of the consulting relationship, it can be threatened when subject-area experts with years of experience are brought in to supplement the knowledge of a funder new to the subject. They run the risk of thinking and acting as if their expertise exceeds that of the client.
- *a consultant who is too invested in one approach to give perspective on alternatives.* In such cases, the more detached perspective of someone not immersed in the client's field may be a useful corrective. Kris Putnam-Walkerly of Putnam Consulting Group notes,

Many times, I've been brought on when the executive director of the foundation says, "I don't know enough to know if I'm being led down the garden path." In one case, I was hired by a client that was growing and started working on substance abuse. It's a field where people are passionate about the way they individually recovered. The client said, "I'd rather have you vet the approaches and give me advice." (See Appendix 1.)

Walter Sweet of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors takes a similar view:

Our clients appreciate the objectivity we can bring. .... I'm able to talk to different experts and present on different approaches. The client is able to tackle things in a way that makes a difference to

*Experts in a hybrid discipline such as strategy, evaluation, or communications may be well-versed in their particular discipline, but not as familiar with the history or players in a subject area or community.*

him or her. For example, in education, a program officer may have a well-formed perspective that is political, but not all donors may agree with that perspective. We find that donors value that we're able to identify the different approaches to the work and the tradeoffs of those approaches. (See Appendix 1.)

- *a consultant who lacks the ability to move issues within the institution effectively.* As independent consultant Dara Major points out, "Depending on the nature of the assignment, subject-matter expertise may not be enough – effective facilitative leadership skills may be needed to meaningfully advance an issue within the foundation." (See Appendix 1.)

A different set of trade-offs ensues when the consultant has process or hybrid but not content expertise. Experts in a hybrid discipline such as strategy, evaluation, or communications may be well-versed in their particular discipline, but not as familiar with the history or players in a subject area or community. When foundations hire consultants who are primarily process or hybrid experts, they may choose:

- *a consultant who is less able to question the foundation's own assumptions.* Consultants familiarizing themselves with a field or community for the first time may be tempted to take the opinions of stakeholders at face value, paying insufficient attention to selection bias and other ways in which client perspectives are partial or slanted. The ability to question

## The quality of consulting to foundations is ... dependent on both buyer and seller going into the relationship with their eyes open.

a client's assumptions is actually one key way in which a consultant adds value. Jara Dean-Coffey of jdcPartnerships points out,

When I've heard people in both the philanthropic and social sectors complain, primarily on strategic planning, is when the consultant doesn't know enough about content or context to really be able to challenge assumptions rather than validating them. Blame lies on both sides, but the client comes away saying, "I wanted more." (See Appendix 1.)

- *a consultant who has difficulty discerning what is a genuinely novel approach.* Those steeped in the particulars of a subject area or community have seen different initiatives come and go and understand what has worked (or not) and why. Without that grounding, a consultant may suggest a tactic that has been tried before and found wanting, or is incompatible with local conditions. As a result, opportunities may be missed that are genuinely novel in the client's particular context.
- *a consultant who has difficulty helping to navigate the waters of implementation.* This is particularly relevant in strategy and change-management work, where a new or modified approach may encounter resistance. If the consultant does not have enough grounding to help the client understand who may veto or block the new initiative, the consultant's advice becomes more difficult to implement.

Balancing content, process, and hybrid expertise is a delicate dance. Too much content, and the consultant loses perspective; too much process, and the consultant loses depth of insight.

How should consultants and the foundations that hire them think about their respective roles and responsibilities in ensuring an effective balance of content, process, and hybrid expertise? The following two sections consider this question from the perspective of the "buyer" (the foundation) and the "seller" (the consultant). Both are important because, as Dara Major points out, "Consultants may specialize and clarify the unique value, services, and integrity they offer to the marketplace, but ultimately it's the client who has to decide what quality looks like." (See Appendix 1.) The quality of consulting to foundations is therefore dependent on both buyer and seller going into the relationship with their eyes open.

### "Buyer" Considerations

We have seen that many mid-size and larger foundations hire consultants for multiple purposes. Effective consulting relationships are therefore essential to helping a foundation achieve its mission. What should foundation staff entering into a consulting engagement keep in mind about balancing content and process expertise?

- *"Know thyself" and be clear about your choices.* An effective consulting relationship requires significant self-awareness from the consultant and the client. Clients need to understand their needs, skills, expertise gaps, and internal and external will for change. Clients may ask themselves: What time can we commit to bringing a consultant up to speed? Are we willing to educate a process expert who's less familiar with our subject area, or must the consultant hit the ground running? Are our internal stakeholders open to change? If not, do we need a consultant more skilled in facilitation and change management than in content knowledge? That type of self-awareness, which also includes understanding of the organization's place in its funding ecosystem, is essential to successful consulting relationships.
- *Balance internal and external resources.* Different types of expertise are appropriate for different kinds of work. What is the supply of the specific combination of expertise needed, within and outside the foundation? Dara Major observes,

When hiring a consultant, as opposed to making a permanent staff hire, foundations in effect buy the expertise they need now rather than build it over time with staff and targeted staff development.

For the foundation, these are both investments in talent. And they start with an assessment by the foundation of what it seeks to accomplish relative to its resources. (See Appendix 1.)

- *Invest in the relationship.* As Block (1999) observes, interpersonal factors are a significant part of the consulting relationship. Chemistry and fit are essential – they contribute to and are enhanced by mutual trust, which is cultivated over time. To get the most out of the desired expertise, funders benefit from investing time and effort in the interpersonal relationship. Numerous guides exist, including one from the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (Greenberg & Schwarz, 2011).
- *Remember that foundation capacity is not well understood.* Part of the challenge of “knowing thyself” or being clear about expertise needs is that foundation internal capacity is little studied and poorly understood. The field does not yet have good frameworks for conceptualizing or assessing the internal capacity of various foundation types.<sup>1</sup> So you are not alone if you feel a bit lost trying to figure it all out.

### “Seller” Considerations

As the literature reminds us, developing expertise takes time – the proverbial 10,000 hours. Consultants need to be strategic in how they invest their time in cultivating, maintaining, and marketing expertise.

- *Get help when you need it.* When process consultants need more content expertise than they’re able to learn in the course of an assignment, they often bring on affiliates who are subject-area, place-based, or identity-based experts and can provide needed information and perspective to the team. For consultants then, the skill to source, select, and manage an affiliate is central to achieving an effective balance among types of expertise.

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*... interpersonal factors are a significant part of the consulting relationship. Chemistry and fit are essential – they contribute to and are enhanced by mutual trust, which is cultivated over time. To get the most out of the desired expertise, funders benefit from investing time and effort in the interpersonal relationship.*

- *Get good at blending types of expertise.* For consultants with a mix of process and content expertise, or who specialize in hybrid forms of expertise such as communications, the art of developing successful engagements can lie in the appropriate mixing and matching of forms of expertise. Holly Minch of LightBox Collaborative, which specializes in communications, observes,

With regard to developing my skills, I focus more on content than process. In some ways, once you get good at process, it’s the same every time. The trick is to bring the right content for the circumstances; that’s what changes. What’s the field of players that an organization is working in, and how do we help prioritize? Pattern recognition is its own form of content expertise. (See Appendix 1.)

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<sup>1</sup> See Raynor, 2014 for an effort that situates funders as one type of ecosystem actor with distinct capacity needs.

## Ultimately, the advice offered above for foundations hiring consultants applies to consultants too: Know thyself.

- *Maintain expertise through professional development.* Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer (1993) observe that expertise is built through deliberate practice, which involves doing things that one has not already done before. For seasoned consultants, the opportunity to try new things, learn new things, and apply new skills helps keep the work fresh and skills sharp. Jara Dean-Coffey reflects on the evolution of her consulting expertise:

When I had too much process and felt I was becoming too general, I went back to more content. I did so because I felt I couldn't sufficiently nudge or probe clients to make assumptions clear, or clarify strategies and intent, because I didn't know enough about what was happening in the field. I actually took a senior-level advisor role at a county health department. I re-engaged with multiple specific health topics. Afterward, what changed for me was a recalibration, perhaps a realignment, of where I had interest and where I could best add value in terms of content. (See Appendix 1.)

Ultimately, the advice offered above for foundations hiring consultants applies to consultants too: Know thyself. Kris Putnam-Walkerly of Putnam Consulting Group observes,

I'm landing on three considerations about professional development and what you need to balance as a consultant. One is who you are as a person. For instance, if I'm hell or high water about water pollution, go with that. Or if I like processes and facilitation, go with that. It's about understanding you as a consultant and your talents and abilities, not forcing yourself to be something you're not. ... Then the next thing is self-confidence and awareness to know what you know and know what you don't know. ... And the

third consideration is, What can I do to improve my client's condition? (See Appendix 1.)

Effective consultants need to understand clearly their own skills and be forthright about where they have gaps and when someone else might be a better fit. In marketing to foundations, consultants must be clear about what they can and cannot do, while also helping clients understand what they really need – helping them question their assumptions. And for those consultants with more technical fields of specialization, the ability to communicate effectively to make their work accessible is crucial. Margaret Egan of Egan Consulting, which specializes in knowledge management for grants systems, shares this:

I've never necessarily led with knowledge management. Clarifying objectives and sharing real, applicable stories helps us arrive at that, "oh, I get it" moment. If your file system is a nightmare and your redundancy is off the charts, then it becomes clear where the need is and where the solution might be. (See Appendix 1.)

### Recommendations

The above reflections and insights are meant to provoke conversation among foundation consultants and those who hire them, and to improve the quality of consulting to foundations by helping buyer and seller understand the role of different kinds of expertise. Foundations, consultants, and the field of philanthropy can benefit from considering the following recommendations.

#### *For Foundations*

- *Be more systematic and open about criteria and best practices for hiring consultants, and the expertise needed.* Of the more than 1,000 foundations responding to a Foundation Center survey, more than one third had hired a consultant (McGill, et al., in press.) It is well past time to be more intentional and open about the how and why of those decisions.
- *Be clear about what you need, when, and why.* Pay attention to where you are in the cycle of your own expertise needs, grounded in your existing internal capacity.

**TABLE 2** National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers: A Resource for Vetting Consultant Expertise

The National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (NNCG) was established in 2006 to provide a resource for foundations seeking quality consulting services.

NNCG's mission is to increase the quality, effectiveness, and capacity of grantmakers by mobilizing and strengthening the work of knowledgeable, ethical, and experienced consultants. To this end, NNCG's website hosts a searchable directory of vetted philanthropy consultants, which allows funders and other interested parties to search by geography, type of grantmakers served, professional expertise, and programmatic expertise. To be listed, consultants must provide five professional references who can speak to their consulting work.

NNCG also serves consultants and the field by providing support for networking, professional development, and thought leadership. It hosts workshops, webinars, and convenings; distributes a monthly membership newsletter; and has partnered with The Foundation Review to co-edit this special issue on philanthropy consulting.

Led by a volunteer steering committee, NNCG has an executive director and two part-time administrative consultants, who support the membership, provide services, and promote the visibility of the organization.

Source: [www.nncg.org](http://www.nncg.org)

### For Consultants

- *Identify your niche, and be clear about what kinds of expertise you do and do not provide.* The categories laid out in this article may be helpful in communicating to potential clients the range of knowledge and skills you possess.
- *Talk more with each other about these very issues of expertise and quality.* Across the board, consultants interviewed for this article welcomed the conversation and had a rich variety of reflections to share. Consultants want and need to continue the conversation about how we further understand and develop expertise, one of the fundamental building blocks of our business.
- *Articulate standards and practices for the field.* Given the range of expertise described above, what are the implications for how we judge and rate quality consulting – not just for ourselves, but also for the field as a whole? How do we work together to articulate standards and practices across a wide range of geographies,

types of work, and types of foundations we serve?

### For the Field of Philanthropy

- *Continue to provide resources, like this issue of The Foundation Review, to advance the conversation.* The National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (NNCG) is a valuable resource for the field, and more foundations should engage with this network as a resource for making good hiring decisions. (See Table 2.)
- *Explore further the multiple dimensions of the consulting relationship.* I did not have room to explore topics like the role of contracting in ensuring accountability of the consultant for services provided, how the supply of consultants in a particular geography impact the types of expertise available to foundations in those areas, or how the need for expertise varies at different points in the organizational life cycle (not just the project life cycle). These merit further investigation.

- *Consider implementing certification standards and processes.* NNCG's directory of vetted consultants is a voluntary effort. Is there a role for infrastructure organizations such as the Foundation Center, Council on Foundations, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, or Center for Effective Philanthropy to support the development of certification standards and processes for effective foundation consulting?
- *Diversify the consultant pipeline.* We know little about the demographics of foundation consultants, but experience and anecdotal evidence suggest that more people of color and others from diverse communities are needed in the field. Initiatives such as the D5 Coalition and affinity groups such as Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy focus on the pipeline of foundation trustees and staff. Given the widespread role of foundation consultants, attention to their pipeline can surely improve the quality of consulting to foundations.

I want to especially thank the talented and thoughtful consultants who shared their insights and experiences, which fundamentally informed the content of this article. I look forward to continued dialogue and improvement of our field.

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- Chris Cardona, Ph.D.*, is director of philanthropy for TCC Group. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chris Cardona, TCC Group, 31 West 27th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10001 (email: [ccardona@tccgrp.com](mailto:ccardona@tccgrp.com)).

#### APPENDIX 1 List of Interviewees

Selection of interview subjects was based on a review of the database of the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers and the author's professional contacts. Invitees were chosen to represent a balance of firm size and type of expertise. Thirty-three invitations were sent via email, and interviews were conducted with 12 individuals representing 11 firms.

- Thaler Pekar, Thaler Pekar & Partners, New York
- Dara Major, Dara Major Consulting, New York
- Fernando Chang-Muy, Solutions International, Philadelphia
- Margaret Egan, Egan Consulting, New York
- Lee Draper, Draper Consulting Group, Santa Monica, Calif.
- Kris Putnam-Walkerly, Putnam Consulting Group, Cleveland and San Francisco
- Marcy Hinand, Helicon Collaborative, San Francisco and New York
- Holly Minch, LightBox Collaborative, San Francisco
- Jara Dean-Coffey, jdcPartnerships, San Francisco
- Betsy Brill, Strategic Philanthropy Ltd., Chicago
- Walter Sweet and Amy Holmes, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles

#### APPENDIX 2 Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I'm writing an article invited for the March 2015 issue of *The Foundation Review* on "Balancing Content and Process Expertise in the Practice of Foundation Consulting."

- Do you consider yourself a content expert or a process expert?
- What are the different dimensions of content and process expertise?
- How do you market yourself – as a content expert, a process expert, both?
- How do these issues affect the quality of consulting to foundations?
- How do you prioritize your own professional development?
- I may wish to quote you with your permission. If I run the quote by you first, would you be open to that?