



CONSULTING SKILLS FOR ACQUISITION PROFESSIONALS: HOW TO PROVIDE VALUE TO YOUR AGENCIES

By Steven Van Rees Sr.

How best can acquisition professionals meaningfully contribute to the success of their agencies' short-term and long-term goals? The easy, but routinely incomplete answer, is to be a technical expert. The more challenging answer is that acquisition professionals should not only be technical experts but also serve as internal consultants working collaboratively with agency staff to identify and solve its business needs.

In some ways, acting as a consultant within an organization is harder than rocket science. At least in rocket science, there is ultimately a right formula that will get you to one correct answer and one best action.

Is it worth it? Absolutely. What a wonderful way to make a truly meaningful difference for your agency and your employees. In fact, many senior managers are now adopting a style called "consultative leadership."

Business competencies identified by the Federal Acquisition Institute, including ability to influence; critical thinking; oral and written communication; and problem solving, directly support an acquisition professional's ability to serve as an internal consultant by:

- Understanding the principles of planning, conducting, and evaluating feedback meetings with program managers;
- Determining the most effective methods of obtaining information and conducting market research;

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Acquisition professionals can serve as internal consultants, providing added value to their agencies.

- Using consulting skills to work with a program manager to develop clear, precise, and complete descriptions of need;
- Explaining the causes of program manager resistance and how to deal effectively with that resistance; and
- Identifying strategies for administering the contract and evaluating the acquisition.

An Acquisition Consulting Model

There are many consulting models, but typically, they are composed of a number of discrete phases that at times overlap. In addition, once the process has begun, the following phases are not always sequential but can overlap. At times, a consultant has to backtrack to an earlier step to clarify issues or deal with resistance that emerges as the project develops.



Consulting Model

This model can be used effectively during all phases of the Acquisition Life Cycle and can increase the likelihood of successful acquisition and mission outcomes.

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Contracting professionals, armed with a well-grounded base of technical knowledge, serve as effective partners.

Acquisition Life Cycle

Acquisition Phase	Consulting Model Step
Presolicitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Entry, Engagement, and Clarifying Needs- Obtaining Information and Conducting Market Research- Dealing with Resistance
Solicitation and Award (Source Selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Describing the Need- Obtaining Information- Dealing with Resistance
Post Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Administering the Contract- Evaluating the Acquisition

An Introduction to Internal Consulting

Key Points

- A consulting opportunity starts with a business problem and a manager or program manager who needs your help to solve it.
- Internal consulting requires partnering, developing commitment for changes, acting authentically, and trusting yourself.

Contracting Professionals as Internal Consultants

Contracting professionals, armed with a well-grounded base of technical knowledge, serve as effective partners with program managers by assisting and guiding them through the often complex world of federal acquisition.

Specifically, a contracting professional acts as a partner by:

- Helping program managers define problems that need solving;
- Providing guidance to the program managers to help them to conduct market research;

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There are times when the Contract Specialist, Contracting Officer, and others working in the contracting arena are in a position of having to follow the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR).

- Assisting in the development of the statement of work, including developing a quality set of requirements that include meaningful performance measures and technical evaluation; and
- Ensuring, after award, that the contractor is successfully meeting the terms of the contract to satisfy the agency's mission.

Although contracting professionals should employ consulting skills, there are times when the Contract Specialist, Contracting Officer, and others working in the contracting arena are in the position of having to follow the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and “inform” a program manager of requirements. This typically happens when either the FAR or an agency policy/procedure must be followed and may involve describing/ explaining rules and policies to the customer.

Presolicitation Phase

Step 1: Entry, Engagement, and Clarifying Needs

Key Points

- Most consulting projects usually evolve along the way, especially when the stakes are high, and the tasks or goals are complex. This will not be a problem for you if you are savvy about the potential pitfalls of the entry and contracting phase.
- The exploratory meeting is the most important time to build program manager commitment to staying involved in the process. Without program manager commitment — no matter how good a consultant you are — your project is likely to be less successful.

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The worst mistake a consultant makes in the exploratory meeting is to try to develop a solution without first understanding the problem.

- The worst mistake a consultant makes in the exploratory meeting is to try to develop a solution without first understanding the problem. Your program manager will not be articulate in describing what he or she wants you to do. It's a problem of "doesn't know what he or she doesn't know." If you start to formulate solutions and responses too early, it may blind you to the real issues and better solutions.

Successful Exploratory Meetings

Use the five-step process below to build commitment and increase the likelihood of project success.

Step 1	Begin or enhance the consulting relationship.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Show your eagerness to help the program manager achieve his or her goals.- Be positive in expressing your interest in this consulting opportunity and your willingness to make a commitment to its success.
Step 2	Scope the project.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Listen carefully to the program manager's view of the problem or situation.- Ask what's been done, and get the results.- Help the program manager clarify what the real issues and desired outcomes are. Ask the program manager to define "success" as related to this project.
Step 3	Explore the consulting expertise needed.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Get the program manager's view on how you can help.- Give specific ideas for the project and what your personal contributions will be. Explain your relevant skills and background.
Step 4	Identify required resources and potential obstacles to success.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Discuss the boundaries for the project. Ask who the decision-makers will be.- Be frank about your personal limitations and suggest other resources as appropriate.- Ask the program manager for his or her preferred methods for collecting data.
Step 5	Agree on next steps.

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Consultants need to build and leverage all sources of personal power such as expertise, hard work and focus.

Framing and Reframing a Problem

To reframe a problem, use W-questions:

- What?
- Why?
- Who?
- When?
- Where?

And an H one:

- How?

Presolicitation Phase

Step 2: Obtaining Information and Conducting Market Research

Interviewing

Interviewing is a structured technique for collecting information from individuals or groups.

Asking Effective Questions

Asking effective questions is an important skill needed to discover and gather all relevant information so as to meet the program manager's needs. Very often a program manager has only a vague idea of the need, and asking effective questions will both clarify the real need, and help to build rapport and trust with the program manager.

Open-Ended Questions
"Fishing"

Probing Questions
"Digging"

Yes/No questions
"Confirm/Disconfirm"

Asking Effective
Questions

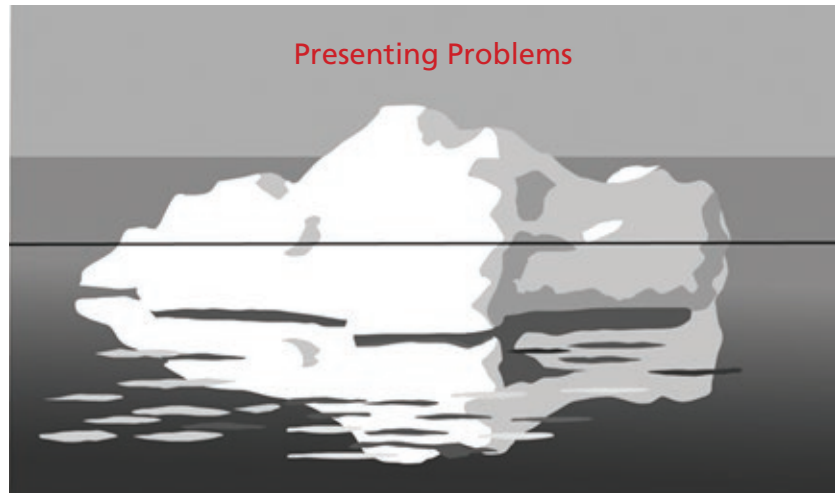
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Unspoken underlying organizational issues and relationship concerns can derail a working relationship or project as quickly as an iceberg can sink a ship.

Presolicitation Phase

Step 3: Dealing with Resistance



Like an iceberg, many of the problems that program managers present go deeper than they realize or will admit. The part that you cannot see is more dangerous than the part you can see. Similarly, underlying organizational issues and relationships can derail a relationship or project as quickly as an iceberg can sink a ship.

Key Points

- Resistance is a normal part of the consulting process and a natural reaction to change efforts.
- Program managers often resist the data and recommendations because they feel vulnerable and exposed or they need more control of the situation.
- The three most common forms of resistance are: deny the data; deny responsibility; and blame the consultant.
- Avoid taking your program manager's resistance personally.



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Asking effective questions is an important skill needed to discover and gather all relevant information so as to meet the program manager's needs.

- Use smart questions to overcome initial program manager resistance.
- As a consultant, you don't have authority, but you can influence the outcome.
- Understanding and using personal power is an effective strategy, regardless of status or position.

Power

A consultant is rarely in control of the situation; by definition, he/she is not a manager. Therefore, it's important to understand how to recognize and use available sources of power to get things done.

Since consultants do not usually possess positional power, they need to build and leverage all sources of personal power as such expertise, hard work, and focus.

Personal power does not depend on position, grade level, or other indicators of status within an agency. While it takes time to build personal power, it is highly effective in consulting.

Solicitation and Award Phase

Step 4: Describing the Need

Key Points

- When acquiring services, agencies are well served by using techniques other than developing "specifications."
- Techniques such as Performance Work Statements present many advantages to both the government and commercial providers.

Developing a Performance Work Statement

Increasingly, agencies are issuing Request for Proposals (RFPs) by using a Performance Work Statement (PWS) to describe their needs for services. Using this technique, the internal consultant

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Many contracting staff learned their job when the culture was to maintain an arm's length distance (or more) from contractors. That will not work in today's environment.

typically uses a “top down” approach by working with program managers to answer three key questions:

1. What do I want?
2. When do I need it
3. How do I know it is good, when I get it?

It is not uncommon for the consultant, especially when working with program managers using Performance Work Statements for the first time, to experience resistance when engaging and clarifying needs and obtaining information.

Post-Award Phase

*Step 5: Administering the Contract; and
Step 6: Evaluating the Acquisition*

Key Points

- Administering a contract is often difficult, especially for large-scale or long-term projects that involve many difficult individuals or program managers.
- If possible, think about using pilot procurements for small wins — try out your ideas in a low-risk environment.
- Develop and implement a meaningful “lessons learned” approach, using reflective practice.

Contract Management Team

There is a growing realization that the “real work” of acquisition is in contract management. This requires that agencies allocate enough resources, in the contracting and/or program offices, to do the job well. Many contracting staff learned their job when the culture was to maintain an arm's-length distance (or more) from contractors and limit the contractor's contact with program people. That approach won't work in today's environment.

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The act of reflection is a great way to increase confidence and become a more proactive and effective contracting professional.

The acquisition team consists of all participants in government acquisition, including representatives of the technical, supply, and procurement communities; the customers they serve; and the contractors who provide the products and services.

Root Cause Analysis

When it comes to addressing and resolving contract issues, such as delays and poor workmanship, there will always be causes, depending on your perspective — vendor, contracting officer, program manager, or COR.

When addressing contract problems and issues, it is guaranteed that there will be multiple potential causes. Finding the most likely cause, through teamwork, is the first step to solving the problem or issue.

Reflective Practitioners

Reflective practice is a way of studying your own experiences to improve the way you work. The act of reflection is a great way to increase confidence and become a more proactive and effective contracting professional.

One reflective cycle includes thinking about and answering the following questions:

- Description: What happened?
- Feelings: What did you think and feel about it?
- Evaluation: What were the positives and negatives?
- Analysis: What sense can you make of it?
- Conclusion: What else could you have done?
- Action Plan: What will you do next time?

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In Conclusion

Achieving what I have described can present a challenge in today's hectic workplace, where the focus is too often on the immediate accomplishment of discrete tasks and activities. The active practice of applying consulting skills, throughout the acquisition life cycle, requires all stakeholders to be mindful of the opportunities to achieve organizational goals that come with balanced acceptance, engagement, and awareness.

About the Author

In 2003, after a 35-year career, Steve Van Rees retired as the Director of Contracting and Administrative Services and Procurement Executive from the U.S. Office of Personal Management (OPM). In this capacity, Steve oversaw OPM's nationwide contracting, real and personal property, facilities, security, and publications management programs.

In 2005, Steve joined the staff of Graduate School USA (GSUSA) as an adjunct Instructor, and teaches classes in acquisition, project management, business analysis, and personal property management. Steve has also developed new course materials for each of these curriculum areas. In 2017, Steve was appointed as GSUSA's Acquisition, Personal Property, and Grants Curriculum Manager.

In addition, Steve served as the Procurement Manager and as an acquisition consultant at the District of Columbia Retirement Board. Steve graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from Rochester Institute of Technology and is a PMI Certified Associate in Project Management.



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