

Chapter 1

The Story of a Successful Consultant

Greg didn't have a graduate degree or a resume that was particularly impressive, but he had learned some valuable skills and understood enough about the fundamentals of consulting to achieve what many would consider a stellar level of success in his chosen profession. He'd traveled a bit, seen a number of professionals in action, and he was astute enough to learn from them. He was a quick study, insightful analyst, and effective communicator.

Shortly after returning from one of his trips, Greg found himself out of work, with no money and in need of some cash to fund his next venture. He was also astute enough to recognize that the real key to leveraging his skills was to find an employer who really needed his expertise, and to bill not for his time but for his know-how. He needed to capture the full value of his deliverable to the client, not just rent himself out by the hour or the day. Instead of poring through the classified ads or going door-to-door asking for work, he embarked on an in-depth research project to find a potential employer whose greatest need was precisely what Greg

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knew how to do best. It took a bit of digging, and a few months of hard work, but he eventually found the situation he knew would be perfect for his needs – the ideal consulting gig, if he could land it.

He developed a strategy that he'd seen work many times before. He began to network with individuals who might know key people at the target client. He was still in research mode, and he learned even more about the client from his contacts. It seemed the client was in over his head. The job was terribly complex, and there were so many pieces to manage that it was impossible to set and stick to priorities. Besides, the client wasn't really cut out for the job to begin with. To make matters worse, the number two person was preoccupied with other matters, and the internal staff simply didn't have the skills or know-how to deal with the seemingly unsolvable problems.

It didn't take long before Greg had an action plan to implement. He secured the introductions he needed. He would "work his magic" to solve Number Two's biggest problem, thus establishing a credential that would earn him the trust and respect of everyone on the client team.

When the time came, it worked just as he'd planned it. Number Two agreed to meet with him based on referrals from his networking contacts. He committed to solving Number Two's biggest single problem, in return for a nice consulting fee and an introduction to the Big Boss. The price he set was high considering the time and effort involved, but quite reasonable considering the benefits for the client. And there didn't seem to be any viable alternative, so he was not really competing on a price basis anyway.

When his proposal was accepted, Greg wasted no time. He got to work and delivered everything he'd promised – and in record time to boot. Everyone on the client team was impressed. Clearly Greg had established his value and earned the right to bid on future projects.

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Of course, there were those on the internal staff who felt threatened. After all, the new consultant had been able to solve a problem that had eluded them, and it was clear that his services would be needed on an ongoing basis. Greg was sensitive to their reaction and tried to befriend and support them as best he could. Nonetheless, he knew his first loyalty was to Number Two; Number Two was confident in giving Greg additional assignments and even introduced him to the Big Boss.

As time passed, Greg continued to deliver high value to his client, though the Big Boss never quite accepted him the way Number Two did. Then Greg got his big break: The Big Boss was reassigned and Number Two moved into the top spot. Greg was right where he wanted to be, making his unique contribution and being well rewarded for the high value he delivered.

The story would end there were it not for growing resentment and hostility among the internal team. They were constantly being compared to the “brilliant consultant” and coming up second best. They had to find a way to remove him or they’d live in his shadow forever. And Greg refused to compromise his own standards of performance or shift his loyalties to win their acceptance. Besides, he’d become accustomed to a pretty nice lifestyle, and he enjoyed as much influence on important matters as an outsider reasonably could expect.

To address its problem, the inside team came up with a plan, arranging to give Greg an important assignment that no consultant possibly could deliver. When he failed, they used it as proof that “the magic was gone” and Greg was back on the street, out of work once again. From a career standpoint, he was finished. No client would hire the high-profile consultant who lost his touch and failed.

If there’s poetic justice, it’s in the postscript to the story. Within months of Greg’s departure, the entire enterprise collapsed and Number Two was out. So was the former Big Boss, and the entire

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dynasty was history. When the post-mortem was written, much of the blame for failure came to rest on Greg's shoulders, though by that time it didn't matter any more. He'd had a wonderful career, done great things for his client, and been rewarded for the value delivered at the time.

What we can learn from Greg

It should come as no surprise to you at this point that “Greg” is none other than Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin. The Big Boss is Tsar Nicholas II, and Number Two is his wife, the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna. Their “enterprise” was the Russian Empire, and all of this took place between 1904, when Alexandra discovered that her infant son and only male heir, Alexis, was a hemophiliac, and the end of the Romanov Dynasty in 1917 – just a few months after Rasputin's untimely death at the hands of the “internal staff” at the Royal Palace.

In fact, Rasputin's first project for Alexandra was to save the life of her bleeding infant son, controlling his hemophilia by some “magic” that to this day remains a mystery. (He repeated the feat more than once, so there must have been something to it.)

In the appendix to this book, I've reproduced one account of the chapter in Russian history that includes a detailed narrative of Nicholas, Alexandra, and “Greg” so that you can see for yourself how closely my paraphrasing of the story parallels the recorded history from the early years of the twentieth century. (It has a lot more detail than would be useful for our purposes, but I know the purists and history majors will appreciate it. There are even a few paragraphs in it that might contain additional insights for new consultants.)

For now, let's go back through Greg's story and identify the lessons for consultants that will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow. I have found twenty-six important lessons in the first eleven paragraphs describing Greg's experience.

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Paragraph 1:

- Formal education isn't nearly as important as having useful, marketable skills.
- You can learn by observing others, as long as (a) they're the right people, and (b) you know what to watch for/learn from them.
- Critical skills: quick study, insightful analysis, effective communication.

Paragraph 2:

- Key is finding the right client.
- Bill for what you deliver; focus on the benefit, not on how many hours/days it will take you to do the job. (Clients value what they pay for and pay for what they value.)

Paragraph 3:

- Consulting jobs don't find you; you find them.
- It's not a numbers game.
- Research is the most important element in landing a consulting project, and it's all done up-front. (This also applies to a job search, of course.)
- Identify a project that requires what you do best.

Paragraph 4:

- Networking is primarily a research tool.
- Consulting works best when you have skills the client doesn't have.

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Paragraph 5:

- Strategic planning comes first; then implementation.
- Consider the client individuals/team, not just the business issues.

Paragraph 6:

- Pre-play all important meetings: “What’s the best thing that can happen at this meeting?”
- Keep it simple stupid. (KISS)
- Don’t be a commodity.
- Price to value!

Paragraph 7:

- Over-deliver against client expectations – and do it fast.
- Establish your value/expertise as quickly as possible.
- Plan the future relationship as you deliver the initial project.

Paragraph 8:

- Each deliverable should logically tie to the next project.
- Remember who the client is and what success looks like from the client’s perspective.

Paragraph 9:

- Always place the client’s best interests first.
- Be sure the client feels you’re delivering value in excess of your cost.

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Paragraph 10:

- Work hard to be accepted by the client team; discuss potential people problems with the client, and include people issues in the project proposal. You'll need to deal with them sooner or later, so better to be candid about them early.

Paragraph 11:

- Never accept an assignment that you don't think you can master. Consulting is a "zero tolerance" business.

In this book I will deal with each of these 26 points by explaining them in more detail and using the principles they represent to answer some key questions that every consultant, and would-be consultant, should ask. I won't necessarily address them in order or identify them explicitly at every point, but will cover them all in the context of contemporary consulting. Also I'll discuss in some detail the basis and rationale for each of the lessons. Then toward the end of the book we'll review Greg's story and see how the lessons all fit together.

A footnote on Rasputin

While history has not treated Grigori Rasputin particularly well, the vast majority of Russian people at the time had a considerably different view of The Evil Monk. Because he was a "holy man" with peasant roots who made it to a position of great influence with the most powerful royalty in all of Europe, Rasputin was something of a folk hero in early twentieth century Russia. He represented hope on the part of the Russian people that the tsars

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would never forget the plight of the common man. And when he was assassinated at the hands of aristocrats, and even members of the imperial family, the upper classes lost whatever support they might have had from the inhabitants of their estates. Indeed, the Russian empire collapsed in a matter of weeks after Rasputin's death.

The romantic in me would like to think that outside consultants who help their client companies improve the quality of their businesses will be appreciated by the stockholders and employees – much as Rasputin was by the Russian peasants – even if the managers who hired them take all the credit and quickly forget the consultants' contributions, or are no longer in a position to make a real difference themselves.

I know better, but I'm sure you can understand this consultant's fantasy!