

Introduction

This book is all about management consulting. If you bought it because you wanted an authoritative text on Russian history, please return the book now and save yourself from a great disappointment.

Furthermore, the kind of management consulting we're talking about is more strategic, business-focused and general management oriented than technical or specific to any single area of functional expertise. While much of the discussion will apply to more technical and specific functional kinds of consulting, the real emphasis will be on general management consulting – the industry so often characterized as providing outside expertise to tackle long-range strategic planning projects or to create new businesses, policies, and approaches to the market.

Many executives – maybe even most executives – consider consulting at some point in their professional careers. Either they fantasize about how much easier life would be if they could deal exclusively with big picture issues and not have to worry about day-to-day implementation, or they see consulting as an alternative second career – one that is clearly better than a forced early

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retirement and one that can be pursued while still leaving ample opportunity for golf, tennis, and long walks along the beach.

Despite the popularity of the concept, however, consulting has a lousy reputation. Consulting is often what people say they're doing when they're really out of work, and "out of work" is a growing and serious condition for many executives right now.

Furthermore, there's a recent phenomenon – no doubt encouraged, if not enabled, by the magic of Internet connectivity and a new level of mobility among well-educated, professional corporate executives – that has encouraged people to consider consulting as a viable option to include as part of a job search strategy.

The result, not surprisingly, is that there are more "consultants" looking for meaty projects, less basis for differentiation between them, and less respect for a profession that didn't have a whole lot of it previously.

There's a joke that's been around for a while that likens consultants to sea gulls. They fly in, eat your lunch, dump all over you, and fly out. It's not very flattering to consultants, I think you'll agree. But it's funny (if you can call it that) because it resonates at some level with most people – including potential clients.

And when you look at the history of consulting as a profession, it's hard to find many success stories or case studies that today's consultants might use as a guide. The consultant's work is usually in the background; the client gets the credit for a project well done. And when the consultant screws up, it's often an occasion for more consultant jokes, ridicule, and a reinforcement of the already less-than-desirable image. Consultants are right up there with used car salesmen, unscrupulous lawyers, and telemarketers when it comes to their reputation with many in the business community.

So why am I writing a book about consulting and using the infamous Rasputin as a poster child for the profession?

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The last thing I want to do is set up Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin as a role model or icon for consultants. He was more evil than good, and his life, taken as a whole, is not one any of us should want to emulate.

That said, Rasputin is arguably the best-known consultant in modern history, and he did do many things right when it comes to implementing a successful consulting strategy. (Ultimately his strategy got him killed, so let's not get too excited about how clever he was.) We can learn from Rasputin by imitating what he did well and shunning his less noble actions. Russian history – and Grigori Rasputin in particular – indeed can provide the basis of an excellent tutorial for management consultants today.

In short order, I'll review the fateful period in Russian history from 1904 to 1917 not so much as a history lesson as a case study in establishing a consulting practice – noting both the positive lessons learned and those aspects which, in hindsight, even Rasputin might have changed if he had another chance.

As I do this, I will try to stick to the story of Rasputin as told in the history books, even though they are not in total agreement on every point. I also will tend to focus on those aspects germane to Rasputin's role as a consultant, minimizing discussion of his religious views, rumored sexual exploits, or drinking habits, and steering clear of the complex politics and alliances surrounding European royalty.

For those of you who are legitimate Russian history buffs, I'm afraid you'll be somewhat disappointed in the depth of my own scholarly research. It was never my intent to explain what happened a century ago in Russia or why. I'm simply trying to draw on the experience of a well-known “consultant” to help his modern-day counterparts achieve success in their professional lives.

I also must disclose up-front that my awareness of Rasputin as “Consultant to the Tsar” is not something I came upon entirely

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on my own. Rather, it is the result of a client's reference to me as "his Rasputin" that sent me to the history books to see if I should be pleased or displeased with the label. Interestingly, though I am certainly not proud to be placed in the same category with a semi-literate, uneducated charlatan, I was forced to admit that there were many appropriate parallels between my role serving that client – a tsar in his own world – and Rasputin's with Tsar Nicholas and Tsarina Alexandra.

I'll be sharing those with you in the pages that follow. My guess is you'll smile as I did when you recognize how much we can learn from "The Evil Monk," as Rasputin was known.