How to Maintain Proper Boundaries

There are certain types of organizational activities which you should avoid, depending on whether you are an external or internal consultant. The nature of the activities in which you become involved depends on what you and your client have agreed upon as your roles and responsibilities. As a professional consultant, you must monitor the types of activities in which you are – and are not – involved. That monitoring is especially important during the phases of Engagement and Agreement; Action Planning, Alignment and Integration; and Implementation and Change Management.

Scope of Contract

If you are an external consultant, your work within your client's organization should be within the scope of the formal agreement that you have with your client. Do not work on activities that are outside of that scope without your client's permission – and probably not without a new or amended contract. For example, if your contract is to facilitate Board development, then do not also consult to developing a Facilities Plan, even though you strongly believe that you can contribute a great deal to that Plan.

Your client has recruited you to work on certain matters within the organization. If you are involved in other matters, the client might become alarmed that you are a "loose cannon" shooting all over their organization. That situation could be frightening to them and cause the client to lose trust in you. You have a formal agreement to focus only on specific matters. If you stray from that agreement, your client could sue you for malpractice.

Even if your client greatly appreciated that you were helping out in other areas, you could be hurting the real project by causing "project creep." That occurs when your project seems to never end because the requirements for the project continue to somehow expand. Eventually, the project loses its focus and effectiveness. Despite your hard work, your client may no longer understand the project and where it fits into their organization.

Note that the above guidelines are applicable primarily to consultants whose practice involves a series of new clients. Some consultants work primarily with the same few clients and in a wide, informal scope of work within their organizations. In those situations, it still is advisable to form some type of agreement regarding the current scope of work for the consultant. The small amount of effort that it takes to formalize an agreement is well worth the protection that it affords the consultant and client in case there are any disagreements regarding the consultant's activities.

Supervising Employees

Generally, supervision includes exercising formal authority to establish goals and priorities for employees who report directly to the supervisor, along with monitoring the timeliness and quality of progress toward the goals. The supervisor usually works according to personnel policies to reward or "punish" the employees' behaviors accordingly and also conducts a formal performance review. How supervision is carried out depends on the culture and policies of the organization.

As an external consultant, unless you have specifically contracted with your client to perform some or all of the duties of a supervisory role, you should not put yourself in the position of supervising employees. If, for example, your services involve guidance to the supervisor, you should guide and support the supervisor to, in turn, effectively supervise their own employees.

Matters of Employment Laws

As an external consultant, unless you are an expert in employment laws and have been hired by your client to review and update personnel policies, you should avoid offering advice about matters of hiring, compensation and benefits, or record keeping. Similarly, you should not offer legal advice unless you are qualified to offer that type of advice and have been hired by your client to provide that advice. However, you should know of competent resources to which you can refer your clients, should you become concerned about a personnel or legal issue.

Interaction with Employees

When you and your client first meet to clarify the desired outcomes and goals of the project (in a "contracting" meeting, in the case of an external consultant), you should also talk about what organizational resources need to be accessed by you and how. If you need to interact with certain employees, both you and your client should be clear about the purpose of that interaction, and about which employees will be involved and how. In addition, your client should notify each of those employees and explain the purpose of the work with those employees.

Joining Client's Board of Directors

Occasionally, your client will be so impressed with your performance as an external consultant that your client asks you to join their Board of Directors. You should not join the Board before you and your client terminate your consulting contract, along with terminating any associated compensation to you. The reason for this is to avoid any apparent or active conflict-of-interest. Directors have a duty of loyalty to their organization, which includes not engaging in Board-related activities that could personally benefit the director by providing money or other assets to that member. That duty ensures that the Board member's activities and deliberations are always focused primarily on benefiting the organization – that the Board member does not have an apparent or actual conflict-of-interest in their role.

Summary – Guide Your Client to Decide How to Decide

As an external consultant, you usually should not be making ongoing operating decisions about the governance, leadership and management of your client's organization, unless you have been hired to hold an interim position as a leader or manager in the organization. However, you should focus as much as possible on helping your client decide how to make those decisions. That is true because, often when people struggle in their organizations, they have gotten away from the fundamental systems and processes (plans, policies, roles and procedures) that are necessary to effectively make decisions and solve problems.