

The background image is a composite. The top half shows a city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers illuminated against a dramatic, orange and yellow sunset sky. The bottom half shows a field of green grass in the foreground, which transitions into a large, cracked, and parched earth surface, suggesting a transition from a lush environment to a dry, desolate one.

Management Consulting

**Great Stuff—But
Beware of Pitfalls**

Brian Schultz

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

—Peter Drucker, Management Consultant

Department of Defense (DoD) acquisition program offices often rely on contractor support services, both for program management support and technical support services. The contractor support staff augments the organic program office staff by providing analytical, technical, information technology, and other support.

Additionally, program managers (PMs) may use specialized management consulting services to provide focused support in organizational improvement efforts. This article examines the benefits, pitfalls and success factors associated with these management consulting services. The observations are based on my experiences as both an industry provider and a DoD PM receiver of these services.

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What is management consulting? Wikipedia provides this definition of management consulting: “Management consulting is the practice of helping *organizations* to improve their *performance*, operating primarily through the analysis of existing organizational problems and the development of plans for improvement.”

As indicated in the definition, management consulting can support many areas in different business domains and can be an important tool for DoD PMs. The focus typically is on strategic planning, organizational effectiveness, change management, process improvements, and transformation planning. These engagements require specialized expertise that is often unavailable within the DoD organic team. Management consultants usually have several years of experience within the industry and are highly skilled at problem-solving, organizational development, interpersonal communications, leadership, and emotional intelligence. Various industry sources indicate it’s a multibillion-dollar industry that has grown steadily over the last several years.

Management consulting can provide significant benefits to an acquisition program management office, including but not limited to the following:

Independent Perspective: PMs may find it helpful to obtain an independent assessment of their organizations’ effectiveness, teamwork and morale. Getting a perspective that is free of bias concerning the issues and potential solutions can provide valuable insights. Many consultants recommend an upfront assessment period to examine existing models, processes and organizational behavior. This can include surveys, interviews and other interactions to help determine the root cause problems and potential solutions.

Identification of Organizational Issues: A root cause analysis is critical to addressing and solving problems. Consultants are very skilled at analyzing an organization from many angles and typically can identify the major issues that need to be resolved in order to meet the PM’s objectives.

Best Practices and New Tools: Consultants often will recommend some of the latest methods and techniques that are relevant to the organizational need. They also should be able to train the program office staff on how to implement and use these practices.

Building Organizational Consensus: A good consulting team can shape efforts to build support for implementation plans that support new initiatives. The consultants’ independence as an honest broker can facilitate a more receptive ear to new ideas, processes and solutions.

Filling a Short-Term Need Quickly: This type of organic talent may be hard to find within an agency—and since it is often a short duration task, hiring full-time staff would be inappropriate. Many consulting companies can be hired very quickly

through task order contracts, and they are accustomed to relatively short and focused engagements.

Management consulting fees can be expensive, so customers should carefully assess their needs and alternatives before the engagement begins. PMs should be aware that there are some common pitfalls that can impact the consulting effort. The following potential pitfalls are based on my experiences and observations of less than optimal engagement outcomes:

Organizational Buy-In Lacking and Change Resisted: Organization development, by its nature, affects the entire organization—and often several external stakeholders. In order to be effective, consulting firms may need the entire organization to buy into the effort. This suggests that the need for the effort should be socialized to the organization so that staff members at all levels understand what the consultants are doing and why. Furthermore, if the consultancy is intended to help identify a way forward, then the organic DoD team leads need to be involved in planning implementation steps and timelines.

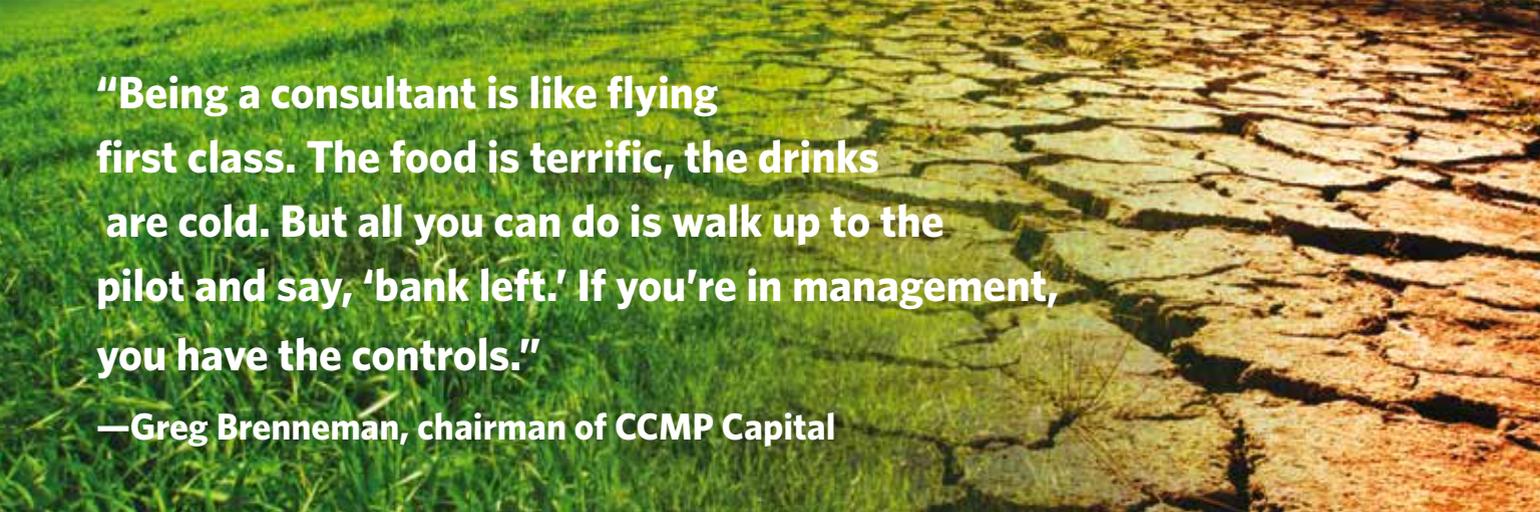
This communications flow-down through the organization is important, especially with large program offices that may include several layers of decision makers and hundreds of staff members. PMs should not assume that word will trickle down to all the right levels in the organization. Including the topic as part of the regular communications battle rhythm and at all-hands meetings are good ways to help ensure that everyone understands the effort.

Getting organizational buy-in can be another challenge. People tend to resist change since it creates some level of uncertainty or fear about the future. PMs should recognize that there must be a continuing effort to obtain buy-in. The organization’s reactions and support should be checked periodically. I have seen cases where leadership was very supportive and engaged at the beginning of a new initiative and later lost interest or gave the effort a lower priority. This behavior can send the wrong message as team members will be carefully observing both leadership talk and actions.

I observed an effort where an organization needed to adopt new business processes as a result of implementing new commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) technology that would improve the efficiency and responsiveness of its work. Unfortunately, many of the staff members did not want to adopt new processes. They disregarded the consultants’ warnings and insisted on implementing the new information technology in a way that would revert to their old process model. This resulted in a customized COTS software product and a less-than-optimal solution. Modifying the COTS product meant that this agency had a unique software application that could not leverage the benefits of COTS upgrades, maintenance and training. In hindsight, the program office leadership did little to explain the need for adopting new processes and did not enforce implementation decisions that would have prevented the poor result.

Unclear Expectations: Studies and postmortem reviews of failed programs often point to unclear and unstable requirements as a major root cause for the failure. This also applies to management consulting engagements. PMs should consider the classic systems engineering model approach to management consulting requirements in which great emphasis is placed on clearly understanding and defining what is needed (known as the Stakeholder Requirements Definition). The subsequent step, Requirements Analysis, takes the requirements and establishes a functional architecture. This involves

I observed one organization that was often too busy with other commitments to assist the consulting team. Such assistance was obviously not a priority of that organization when compared with other important program office tasks. Despite a detailed schedule and calendar invitations that accommodated the team's busy workload, key staff members would miss meetings and other important events. There also was a lack of leadership governance to routinely review status and issues. As could be expected, both parties were unhappy with the outcome.



"Being a consultant is like flying first class. The food is terrific, the drinks are cold. But all you can do is walk up to the pilot and say, 'bank left.' If you're in management, you have the controls."

—Greg Brenneman, chairman of CCMP Capital

mapping all the functions needed to support the performance requirements. The functions then are organized in a logical manner to ensure they support all the performance requirements with no duplication.

An equivalent approach for management consulting would involve developing the required functions (or tasks) that must be implemented to support the overall desired performance outcomes. This will require critical thinking to build a task hierarchy, similar to a work breakdown structure. The hierarchy serves as a guide in allocating resources and time needed to ensure credible execution. While painstaking to develop, I have observed this approach work well since it ensures the DoD team and the consulting team agree on the outcome desired, interim and final milestones, and a complete list of tasks for the consultants to perform.

Inadequate/Non-Responsive Program Support: Lack of support from the DoD program office team is another potential problem area. In order to be effective, the consulting team must have access to the appropriate information and resources. The DoD PM and program office team leadership should ensure that resources to support the consulting effort are available, including time to discuss observations and recommendations. Given the strategic nature of most of the management consulting engagements, an elevated priority should be given to supporting the consultants' effort.

In order to avoid the pitfalls, it's important for the PM and the lead company consultant to set a good foundation that will enable a successful outcome. Some ground rules for success:

Desired outcome and deliverables: Defining both the outcome and deliverables should be the first step. The desired outcome should drive everything that follows (including any deliverables). The DoD PM owns this task and should ensure consultants understand clearly the overall goal and have an opportunity to seek clarification and provide feedback and suggestions. This desired outcome will also enable the consultants to design an appropriate intervention strategy to facilitate support. An intervention strategy is the specific approach or methodology the consultant will use to enable the outcome.

Metrics for meaningful organizational results: Establishing metrics that will measure the outcome of a project is not always easy but should be addressed before the project begins. If there is no way to verify the proposed project outcome, then the PM may want to consider modifying it so it is measurable. The metrics can be simple and may take time to realize—even well after completion. But it will be difficult to hold teams accountable if there is no way to measure effectiveness. In acquisition, these measurements can take years. I managed an effort in which our metric was the number of potential and signed cooperative agreements. This task took years to accomplish, but the framework our consultant proposed did help us to do so. We kept the metric in place, recognizing it was a

