Choosing a Consulting Role

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Introduction

In many cases, the consultant role is not well-defined and clearly understood by both the client and consultant. This can lead to

- false expectations and misunderstandings
- no-win situations

Consulting errors arise when

- the consultant's view of the client-consultant relationship and the intervention that will be needed differs from what the client thinks is needed or wanted
- consultant's view of the consultant-client relationship and the intervention that is possible (given the consultant's capacity constraints) differs from what the client thinks is needed or wanted

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The Tension

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Goals and Roles

In any consultation, the client will have two types of needs:

The need for results

Refers to concrete outcomes associated with the project. These might include changes to the bottom line, skills learned, or changes in behavior and attitudes.

The need for growth

This means increased capacity to perform new functions or behaviors on a continuing basis.

If a high level of growth is achieved in the consultation, then the client will be able to do the job next time with less or no outside help.

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Results Vs. Growth

The need for results and the need for growth will vary depending on the nature of the consulting project.

Catching the fish for the client

In performing a one-time service with which the client is unfamiliar, the consultant's major focus is likely to be "getting the job done" for the client.

Teaching the client to fish

In helping the client perform an important and recurring—but new—task, the appropriate emphasis is on helping the client learn how to perform that task over the long haul instead of merely producing an immediate result.

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What's Needed

In order to facilitate collaborative agreements between clients and consultants, we need three things:

1. a clear understanding of the purposes of a consulting relationship
2. a language for talking about consulting roles
3. criteria for determining which role is appropriate in a given situation

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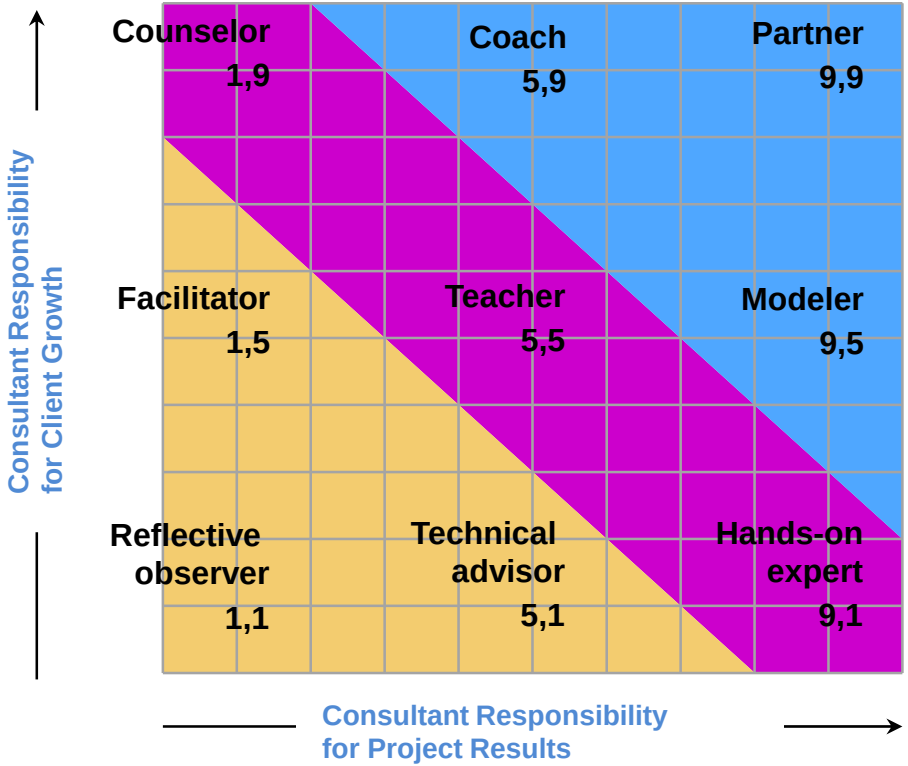
The Consulting Role Grid

Low-intervention roles

Moderate-intervention roles

High-intervention roles



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Typical Role Statements for the Consulting Role Grid

Counselor "You do it; I will be your sounding board."	**Coach** "You did well; you can add this next time."	**Partner** "We will do it together and learn from each other."
Facilitator "You do it; I will attend to the process."	**Teacher** "Here are some principles you can use to solve problems of this type."	**Modeler** "I will do it; you watch so you can learn from me."
Reflective observer "You do it; I will watch and tell you what I see and hear."	**Technical advisor** "I will answer your questions as you go along."	**Hands-on expert** "I will do it for you; I will tell you what to do."

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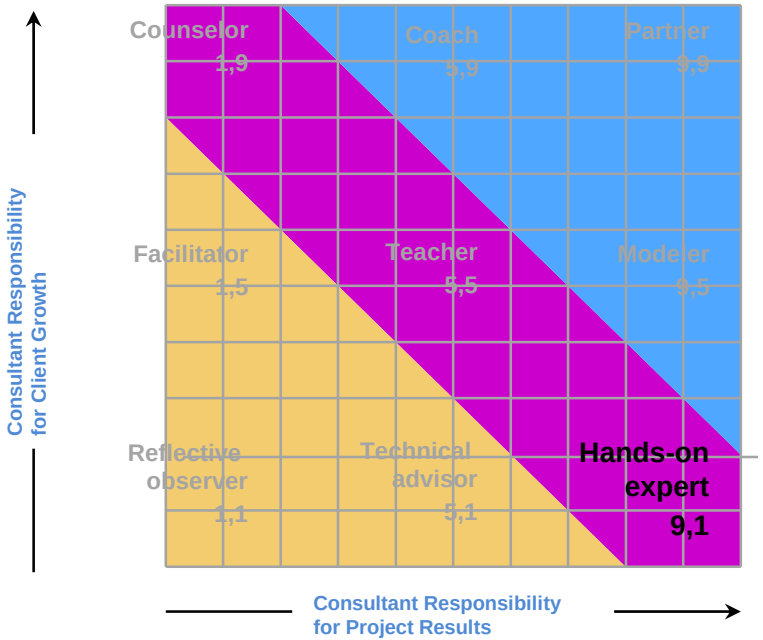
Hands-on Expert Role



Consultant undertakes the task on behalf of the client.

Consultant has most (if not all) of the responsibility for producing good results.

The client is not expected to grow in capacity (very much) to do the task the next time.

The client will need the consultant again next time in order to perform the task equally well.

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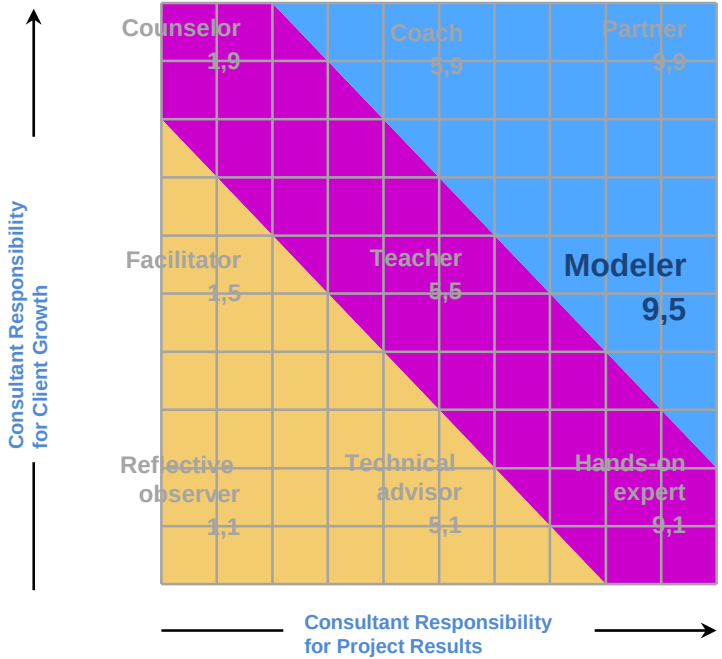
Modeler Role



Consultant is highly responsible for results in the project, but there is also some value in the client system building its own capacity.

The consultant carries out the task, but does so in a way that makes his or her approaches and techniques apparent.

The consultant is available for answering questions about what he or she is doing, and why.

The implication is that sometime in the future, the client may carry out the task.

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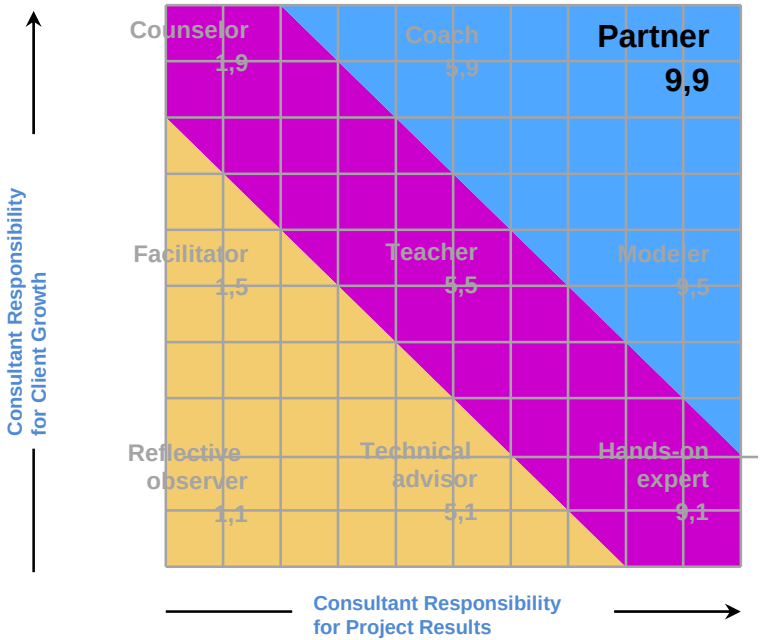
Partner Role



The partner role implies high responsibility for results *and* growth.

It assumes that a big jump in the client's capacity to do the task is an important goal.

The client and the consultant have the capacity to successfully perform aspects of the task and that both will share responsibility for the results.

The partner role means that the client is ready to learn in a hands-on way and that the consultant can teach effectively in this mode, as well as guide the task to successful completion.

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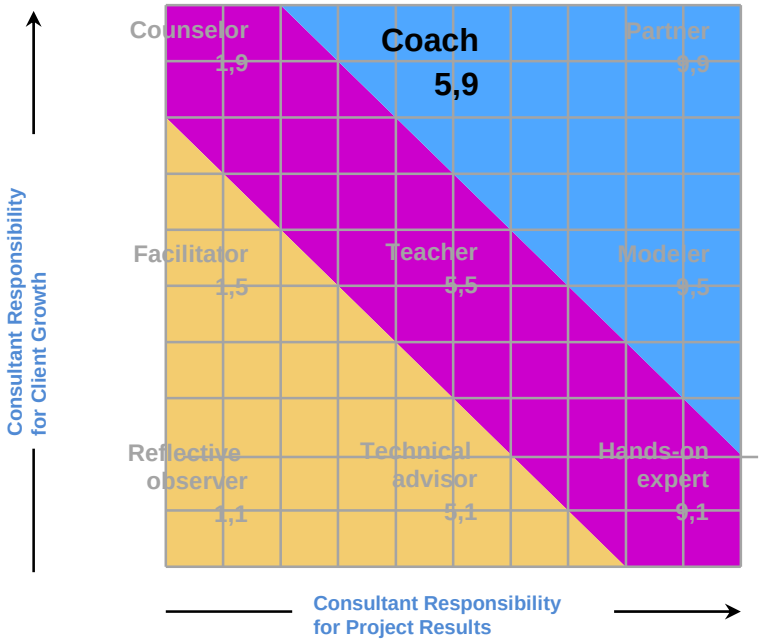
Coach Role



In the coach role, the consultant does not have direct responsibility for performing the task. Instead, he or she may observe the performance of the task and provide feedback.

The coach uses highly directed instructional techniques to improve the client's performance providing feedback, prescribing and observing practice sequences, and giving advice and support during actual job performance.

The coach is indirectly involved in carrying out the task, but highly involved with the client and his or her growth.

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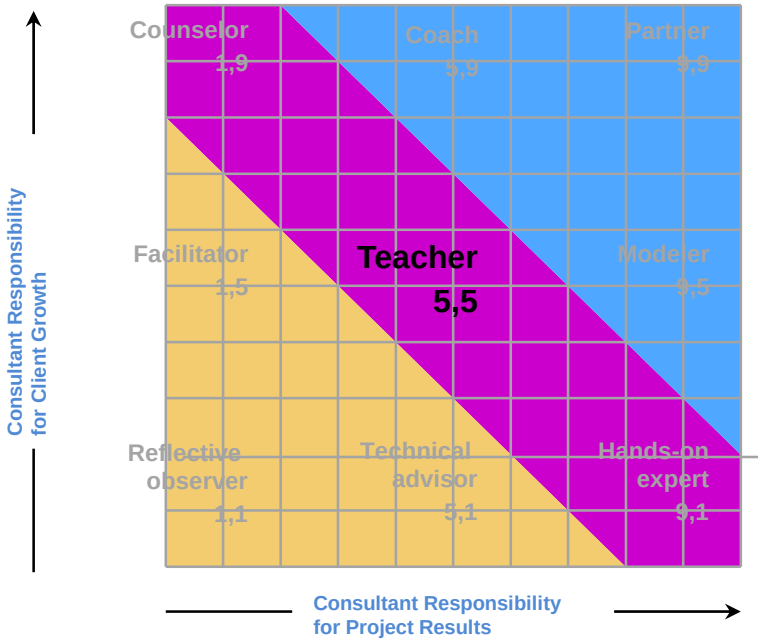
The Teacher or Trainer Role



The teacher or trainer role is even more removed from the scene of the action.

The trainer or teacher, unlike the coach, is concerned with general performance rather than with performance in a specific situation.

For example, the teacher is concerned that the client knows the basic principles and has mastered the skills of managing a meeting, while the coach may actually observe the client leading meetings and discuss the results afterwards.

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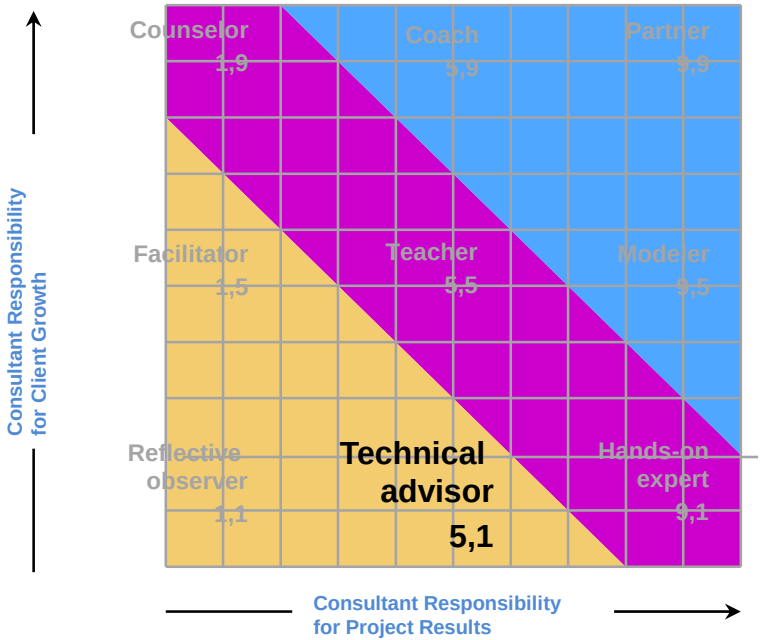
Technical Advisor Role



The technical advisor role is a back-up role. In this role, the consultant has moderate responsibility for results; the client uses the adviser's expertise for specific purposes.

The technical advisor may have close or distant personal relations with the client, but his or her concern is not the growth of client capacity, except in an incidental sense.

The focus is on helping the client get over a specific problem that the technical adviser's knowledge and experience can solve.

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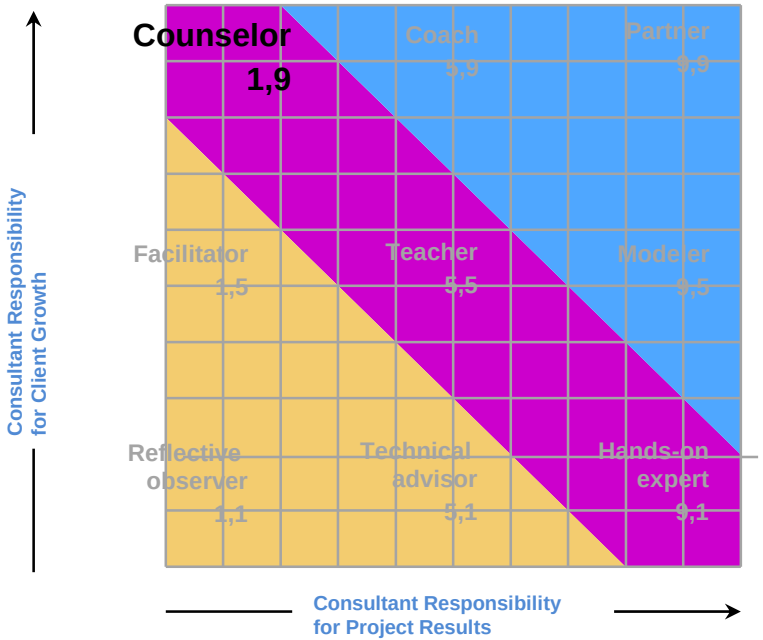
Counselor Role



The counselor's concern is almost entirely for the capacity of the client to perform the task.

The counselor tries constantly to help the client clarify and set goals, maintain positive motivation, and develop and implement effective plans.

The counselor often is removed from the performance of the situation. He or she may have to rely on the client's data about what is happening in the project.

Therefore, much of the counselor's skill is in helping the client to gather, analyze, and develop conclusions from his or her own experiences.

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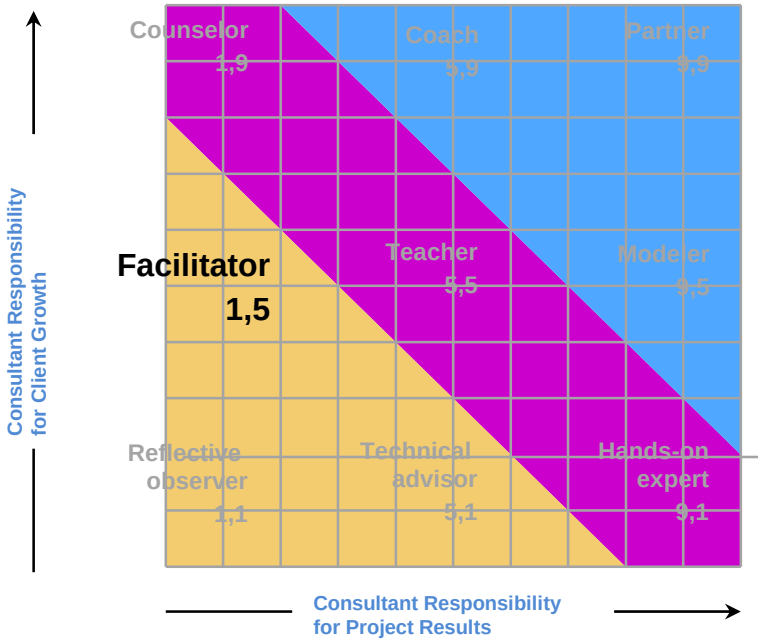
Facilitator Role



The facilitator role consists largely of helpful but process-oriented activities such as providing techniques such as problem analysis or brainstorming, and planning and leading meetings.

Through the facilitator's intervention, clients may absorb the helpful techniques and processes the facilitator uses. That leads to moderate growth of the client's capacity in these areas.

One main reason the consultant is an effective facilitator is that he or she has a low stake in the task at hand and is neutral within the client group.

This is a low task-responsibility role.

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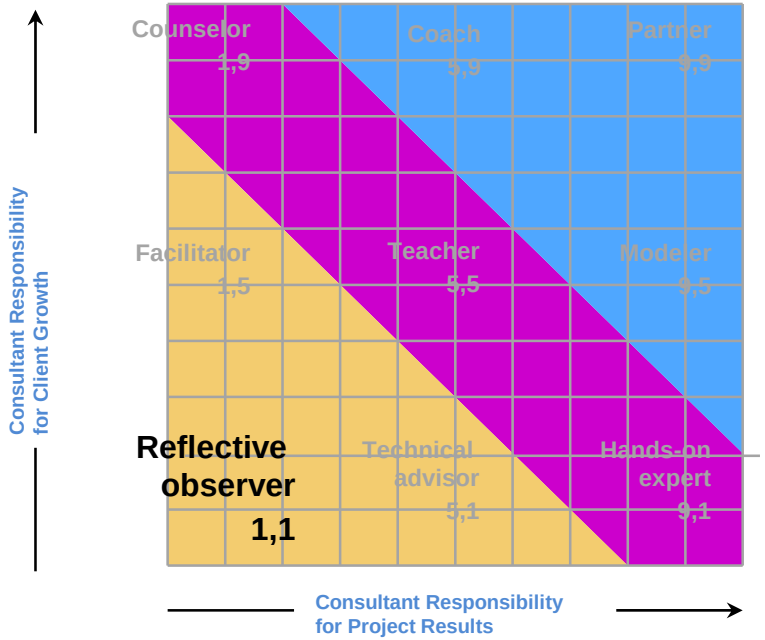
Reflective Observer



With the reflective observer role, the client is most responsible for results and capacity building; the consultant is least responsible.

The consultant's task is limited to feeding back observations and impressions.

In spite of the low activity level of the consultant, this role can have a dynamic effect on a client system that is skilled in using such assistance.

The reflective observer can help clients monitor themselves on such ambiguous but crucial indicators as trust, teamwork, and openness.

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Multiple Roles are Possible

A consultant may play multiple roles simultaneously within a client system, but with different clients.

For example:

- Counselor to the chairperson of the MSG (Management Steering Group)
- Coach to the leader of the SEPG (Software Engineering Process Group)
- Trainer to members of the TWGs (Technical Working Groups)

The consulting role should always be defined situationally with a specific client or client group.

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Guidelines for Choosing a Role

The process of role choice and transition is obviously a critical area of judgment and skill for the consultant. We can identify three key areas to consider:

Organizational situation

Characteristics of the client

Characteristics of the consultant

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The Organizational Situation

The roles of partner and modeler are likely to be appropriate in cases where there is immediate need for results and for client capacity.

If client capacity is already moderate to high, then the low-intervention roles (counselor, facilitator, reflective observer, and technical advisor) may make more sense.

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Characteristics of the Client

In determining an acceptable role relationship, the client ought to ask the following questions:

- Will the proposed consulting relationship be likely to achieve the results that the organization needs?
- Will I be helped to grow in the process, in a direction that is in my long-term interests?
- Will the skills that I already possess be used to their fullest extent?
- Are the skills that the consultant possesses being used in the best way?

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Characteristics of the Consultant

The capacity of the consultant is the most obvious limiting factor in determining a consultant role.

Consultants cannot take on the more results- or growth-oriented roles if they lack the experience, knowledge, and confidence to do so.

But if the consultant is competent to take on various roles, how should he or she choose among them?

Willingness **Interest** **Time**

The consultant should ask:

- Can I do this?
- Do I want to serve in this role?

A role that is unwanted will probably not be well-performed.

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Role Negotiation

Here are five steps for effective role negotiation for the client and consultant.

1. **Collaborative clarification of the organization's need for results and capacity for each client or client group.**
2. **Open discussion of the current capacities of the clients and consultants.**
3. **Identification of an appropriate match between client needs and consultant capacities relative to the various tasks and client groups, using the consulting role grid.**
4. **Assurance that all parties have the support they need in the situation to deliver on their accountabilities for results and growth.**
5. **Commitment of both parties to their respective role responsibilities in the consultation.**

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Successful Outcomes

Consultants and clients can do a better job of negotiating roles, and increase their chances for successful project outcomes.

But that can only happen if both parties are clear about the outcomes the organization needs and the capacities they both have.

- The consulting role grid can help match needed outcomes with appropriate levels of consultant involvement.
- The five-step model of role negotiation can help ensure that the agreements reached can be successfully carried out.

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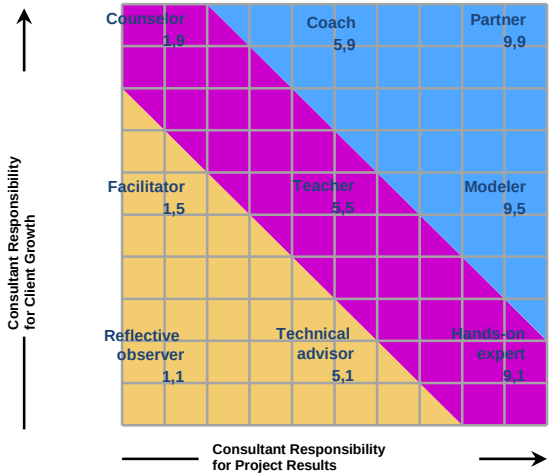
Summary

Consulting role grid



Five-step model of role negotiation

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3	Identification of an appropriate match between client needs and consultant capacities relative to the various tasks and client groups, using the consulting role grid.
4	Assurance that all parties have the support they need in the situation to deliver on their accountabilities for results and growth.
5	Commitment of both parties to their respective role responsibilities in the consultation.

By using this simple framework, consultants and clients may be able to avoid some of the game playing and misperceptions that can handicap consulting relationships from the early stages.

The result is openness about what is needed and about how the client and the consultant can meet those needs.

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