

Practitioner's Corner

Arrogance: Who Needs It?

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Every year, I am invited to the island of Hokkaido, Japan to lecture on leadership development to a group of students from a small institution located near the city of Sapporo. On average, I spend about two weeks with the student body. For me, it is one of the highlights of the year. On a particular trip in October 2006, I was privileged to speak to a group within the city of Eniwa—about an hour outside Sapporo. After my lecture on innovation, I had a memorable conversation where I mentioned that one of the problems with Americans traveling overseas is the tendency to behave as if they had all the answers. The woman I spoke with agreed emphatically and went on to share her personal experience with Americans.

Over the years, I have been able to conduct a number of values surveys both in the United States and Japan. Only in Japan was humility selected as a coveted value. In the U.S., humility never came close to being chosen as a desired ideal. Could this offer a clue as to why American consultants traveling overseas may be perceived as arrogant?

The value of engaging with local culture is obvious (at least it should be). While the influence of power is always at the back of the consulting relationship, most consultants should realize the need to minimize power as a variable in the consultant-client relationship. No matter the culture or location of a client, consultants should consider how humility could make a difference in their relationships.

George Washington, an unlikely source for this topic, realized that power had the ability to corrupt. The general who would later become the nation's first president acknowledged his lack of education and military experience when accepting his new role in the American Revolution. Few consultants would dream of acknowledging their ignorance. General Washington also understood that real power was vested in elected officials in Congress. Whether he saw these officials as the true clients—representatives of the people—is debatable. What is clear is the *otherness* or outward focus of his leadership style. But aren't consultants supposed to be the experts? Now may be a good time to heed the notion that "it's not about you, it's about them" seriously. In his speech to Congress on June 16, 1775, Washington declared:

I am truly sensible of the high honor done me in this appointment, yet I feel great distress from a consciousness that my abilities and military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important trust. . . . But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think of myself equal to the command I [am] honored with. (McCullough, 2005, p. 49)

Consultants seldom make speeches. While they may declare their intentions and passions to clients at briefing and planning meetings, it is usually their reports, proposals, and recommendations that speak. In this regard, self-effacement typically runs contrary to the consultant's self interest.

Consultants should be lifelong learners who approach the consulting task with a sense of wonder. An open mind and willingness to learn while indicating one's lack of knowledge can become a springboard for stimulating conversations with a client, yielding useful and unexpected insights. Declaring a willingness to learn (and, where necessary, unlearn) displays a vulnerability that may run counter to the commonly preferred model of expert consulting. However, it also reveals a more honest approach. Remember, consulting is less about the tools and techniques, but more about the attitude, and above all, the relationship. I believe that this plays into the current demand for values-based consulting or for consultants who are authentic about who they are, what they represent, and ultimately, what they are able to deliver. Put simply, the best consultants lead humbly with their hearts as opposed to arrogantly with their heads.

About the Author

Bruce Macdonald, Ph.D. is president of Renewal Consulting, a company that provides educational tutorials on occupational stress awareness and prevention, as well as leadership and personnel development. Dr. Macdonald has conducted seminars throughout the United States as well as in Japan. He has also authored a number of articles pertaining to leadership development. In addition, he is the industry chairman for the Hampton Roads Postal Customer Council.
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Reference

McCullough, D. (2005). *1776*. New York: Simon & Schuster.