

Strategic Business Partner and Performance Consultant: Two Important Roles, Some Important Differences

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"Project managers in our Information Systems group are missing deadlines and running over budgets we have established for these projects. I would like to provide them with some project management skill training; we may also want to look at re-engineering the project management process we use."

"Our business has been losing market share for our signature brands in the past three years. Clearly we need to take some actions that will help get our business, as well as our employees and managers, back on track. Let's discuss what actions we need to take."

Which of these requests would a performance consultant typically manage, and which request would a strategic business partner normally address? We will answer that question in this article, but first let's discuss each of these roles in more detail. And, note that we are using the term "role," not "job." Within any job, people fill many roles...some describe this as wearing many hats. The two roles we focus upon in this article are performance consultant and strategic business partner. There are people who work in both of these roles; other individuals only fill one of them. The two roles share much in common but also have key differences. Let's begin by examining how these roles are similar.

Similarities Between Roles

People who work in the role of performance consultant and the role of strategic business partner...

- **Utilize Human Performance Technology Principles:** They examine situations from a systematic and holistic perspective, identifying performance gaps and their causes.
- **Focus on Results, Not Solutions:** Individuals in both roles view the solutions they offer as means to an end, not the end itself. A solution would be that individuals develop skills; the result is that those individuals apply the skills in the workplace and contribute to business results.
- **Initially Use a Solution and Cause Neutral Approach:** Individuals in either role realize that jumping to solutions is a quick way to achieve failure. We have found this to be one of the most difficult skills for performance consultants and strategic business partners to master. Business environments typically encourage quick solutions and immediate action. Many of us who work in these roles have been conditioned to solve problems, sometimes before we have determined what *the problem is*.
- **Partner with Clients:** While performance consultants and strategic business partners can affect the capability of employees within the organization through learning and HR solutions, this is only half of the solution. The other half is the work environment and infrastructure. For example, are roles and expectations clarified? Do people have access to coaching and reinforcement as they perform their jobs? Managers control these factors. It is they who own the business and whose performance needs are being supported. They are also in the chain of command of the individuals whose performance requires change. Therefore, both performance consultants and strategic business partners must build and deepen partnerships with manager-clients and work collaboratively with them to achieve results.
- **Manage, Not Deliver, Solutions:** Both performance consultants and strategic business partners must be adept at project management. They become orchestrators of solutions needed to address a specific business or work group. They identify the "experts" in solution design and delivery. As there is a myriad of possible solutions that may be needed for any given situation, it is not possible for one individual to have all the required expertise. It is also difficult to have the time needed to build relationships and analyze situations when time is taken to design and deliver solutions. For all these reasons, people in either role most appropriately manage, not deliver, solutions.

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The Differences Between Roles

There are five ways in which the roles of the performance consultant and strategic business partner are different.

1. **Scope of Work:** When working as a performance consultant, the goal is to partner with clients to enhance the performance of people in one or more work groups, ensuring that their performance supports business goals. Strategic business partners focus on enhancing capacity of organizations (such as a business unit, division, major function or the entire enterprise) to achieve business results. This is a larger focus that will encompass addressing needs of multiple work groups. It also frequently requires addressing organizational design issues.
2. **Depth and Type of Client Partnerships:** Developing effective partnerships with clients and growing personal knowledge of the "business of the business" of clients are accountabilities for individuals in both roles. We use the term client to mean the person or persons responsible for achieving the business results supported by the initiative. Strategic business partners frequently form partnerships with senior leaders within the organization, maintaining these partnerships on a *sustained* and ongoing basis. Performance consultants are more likely to develop *project-based* partnerships with individuals at any managerial level within the organization. An implication of this difference means that those who work in the role of strategic business partner must have a very deep knowledge of the business of the clients' business. We often indicate that a strategic business partner is someone who is a business person specializing in the human side of business.
3. **Solutions Utilized:** A performance consultant most often oversees and manages implementation of solutions that are provided by that consultant's function. For example, performance consultants who work within a corporate university or global learning center typically offer a variety of learning and development solutions including coaching, mentoring, formal training and job aids. By contrast, strategic business partners broker solutions from any function within the organization as well as from external suppliers.
4. **Timeframe of Work:** Certainly the scope of the project has an impact upon the timeframe of work. Performance consultants, working on initiatives that enhance performance of work groups, generally are involved in projects that focus on a timeframe of 12 months or less. Strategic business partners, focusing on initiatives that result in organizational change, are involved in projects that have a one to five year window.
5. **Organizational Position:** Performance consultants are usually located in the learning and performance function of an organization (i.e. global learning center or corporate university) while strategic business partners are most frequently within the human resources organization. In our experience, those individuals who have worked in the role of HR Generalist are frequently transitioning into the strategic business partner role, forming a single point of contact for their clients.

So, What's the Answer to Our Question?

The bottom line is that both roles are critical if organizations are to be successful. Because of both the similarities and differences we have noted, the roles can be very synergistic. And the answer to the question we raised at the start of this article? The first example, entering as a request for a learning solution, would most likely be managed by a performance consultant; the second situation, coming with no pre-defined solution and with a clear link to a business need, would most likely be the responsibility of a strategic business partner to manage. All we can say is *vive la difference!*