

The Art of Consultancy: A Guide for Theological Programs and their Consultants

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Author's Note

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Introduction

A recent initiative undertaken by the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education has been the formation of ICETE Consultants. (Details of the ICETE Consulting initiative will appear shortly on the ICETE webpage at <https://icete.info/>. The initiative is being developed under the leadership of Dr. Kevin Lawson and myself.) We seek to train, supervise, support, and network a team of consultants who will serve the development of theological education globally. ICETE Consultants will support schools and regional accreditation commissions within the ICETE network and beyond as they seek to raise the standard of robust and reliable educational capacity.

We anticipate that consultancy will occur at three levels:

- With schools that are confronting a particular challenge or that wish to strengthen some aspect of their efforts via conversation with an outside specialist;
- With schools seeking to begin new initiatives via resources and dialogue;
- With follow-up for accreditation, cooperating with regional accreditation commissions to help schools develop.

The ICETE Consultants initiative seeks to support the vision for qualitative growth in theological schools by making available a cadre of experienced and qualified consultants who are able to advise schools with wisdom and grace.

However, understanding the process of consultancy, matching the right consultant to the right context, and ensuring the right attitude in both the school and the consultant are essential elements of a fruitful experience. This article advises theological schools as to what sort of consultant may best serve their needs, describes the character of a good consultant, and outlines what the school can expect during the consultancy process. Finally, it describes the phases of consultancy.

Building Capacity: Organizational Questions for Consultancy Visits

Where are we?

Before inviting consultants, a school must seek to determine its current situation and its key potential growing points. If the school does not have a clear understanding of its needs, a more general team consultancy may be called for, a group that can help clarify the needs. (Many initial accreditation visits serve this general purpose.)

What type of consultant do we need?

Once a school knows its potential growth points, its leaders need to know what kind of person will most likely be able to help them move forward. Equally, consultants need to know if they are capable of bringing what is required to a particular situation and consequently when to accept and when to refuse an invitation to consult with a school (Richarme 2011).

To help the school decide what consultant might be right for them, let me analyze different types of consultant and what each has to offer. (Note that the roles are not strictly discrete.)

- *Field specialists* have been actively engaged in ministry for years – perhaps decades – and provide understanding of the whole field. This type of consultant has extensive contacts, having worked with most of the other key figures in the field. Often, these field specialists have completed successful ministry careers and have moved into consultancy to stay involved in a field that has played a major role in their lives. People listen to these specialists and trust their judgment because of their years of experience.

This consultant can be particularly helpful for a school that is considering entry into a new area or a new approach. This consultant will tend to focus on the big picture and how the big picture may impact the details of decision-making. Field specialists generally have wide knowledge of how similar organizations function elsewhere and how structures and practices have succeeded or failed in comparable situations. (Senior consultants like these must realize to what extent their

counsel may be dated, as fields change rapidly.)

Examples of where a field specialist may be valuable would be when a college wishes to transition to become a university, or a college wishes to initiate a new masters or doctoral program, or where a centralized college wants to open extension centers. In each case, a field specialist knows how these changes have been implemented elsewhere and knows potential pitfalls and dangers. Through a more global knowledge, the field specialist can advise the college whether or not the initiative is appropriate and what steps might be taken to maximize potential success.

- *Process specialists* are able to identify more efficient and effective ways of doing things; they concentrate on actions. Unlike field specialists, for whom global experience is the greatest asset, process specialists have extensive successful experience on the ground – for example, as President or Dean. The process specialist can see both the big picture and step-by-step means of strengthening internal processes. Process specialists are a bit like doctors – analyzing symptoms, seeing possible causes, and recommending suitable therapy. Good process specialists are able to propose simple recommendations that are not simplistic. They may also suggest specific functional specialists who could help weak elements in the institution.

A school must take care that the process consultant recommends process modifications that are relevant to its unique ministry context and are not generic. Equally, process specialists must ensure that the situation will be monitored carefully after they leave.

An example of where a process specialist may be helpful is where enrolments have fallen off steadily, so a school needs someone to diagnose the cause to determine if different processes might improve recruitment. Another example would be where financial sustainability has become problematic; a process specialist could suggest possible pathways for streamlining the school and attaining greater financial health.

- *Functional specialists* are specialists in a specific field, such as one of the five elements of educational institutions – governance, educational excellence, administration, pastoral care, and external relations; they focus on people. This specialist is useful in setting up a new element within a school and identifying the tasks, responsibilities, and outcomes of that element. In contrast to process specialists, who look for more efficient pathways for getting the job done, functional specialists recognize gaps and are able to suggest ways to fill these gaps. A school must take care that the consultant is aware of its other elements and how changes suggested in one area impact other parts of the school.

Field and process specialists often have functional expertise that emerges from their long experience. A common example would be to have an experienced Academic Dean consult with a college where they have a new Dean who is unsure of what is involved in the job; or perhaps the school is even struggling to find a person qualified, and the consultant can help identify the right person. Another possible scenario that suggests the need for a functional specialist would be where a Board has sought to micromanage a school – or perhaps the Board has been too hands-off. Having an expert in governance consult with the Board holds potential for building a healthy relationship with the school's leaders.

- *Subject matter specialists* are more engaged in a narrow subject or technology; they have comprehensive knowledge about a specific area. Some might be specialists in e-learning, orality, critical thinking, curriculum development, library, or academic documentation. The subject matter specialist is not concerned about the big picture.

The school must take care with subject matter specialists because the knowledge they possess is so specialized that only other subject matter specialists in their field are able to tell if they are correct or not. Also, the school must take care with subject matter specialists because their expertise must be current, particularly in quickly changing fields.

- *Pioneering specialists* are leaders who have had significant experience in launching creative new ways of doing things. They have encountered opposition, which they have learned to address appropriately. Pioneering specialists are valuable for schools seeking foundational change. A school must be careful that a pioneering specialist does not simply repeat an innovative package that may have worked elsewhere; the pioneering specialist must help the school discover its own pathways forward.

Some situations that might benefit from a pioneering specialist are the development of research centers, or the establishment of cooperative initiatives with other colleges or even with government agencies. A pioneering specialist is comfortable with creative thinking “outside the box” and has experience in risk-taking.

- *Sounding board or critical thinking consultants* are particularly skilled at listening, analyzing, and providing insight. These are the rarest. They may or may not know anything about your field or the characteristics of your school. But they are able to listen carefully to your descriptions and determine whether the arguments are logical and consistent. They can ask questions and test assumptions that people within the school take for granted. They can provide an alternative perspective on situations that may not be immediately apparent to insiders. And, possibly most important to senior leaders, they may offer a willing ear for highly confidential concerns that the leaders don't wish to share with others.

Sounding board consultants often function like psychotherapists, using Socratic questioning, answering questions with questions, and facilitating others' self-diagnosis and planning. One reason that these are the rarest of consultants is that these consultants offer only themselves to an organization – they do not bring a finished product. Unlike engagement-oriented consultants, this type of consultant is most effective over a longer period of time, gaining the trust of the school leadership. In return, their insights are given time to mature and bear fruit. A school must take care, however, that the consultant is providing enough value to justify the time and possible expense involved.

An example of where a sounding board consultant may be helpful would be at a school where there are rumblings of conflict, and the leadership is unsure what factors are leading to this loss of trust. (There may be many reasons, such as differences in understanding as to the school's purpose, unspoken expectations, external stressors, and so forth.) A good sounding board consultant would be able to ask the right questions of the right people so as to help the leadership find the best pathway forward. But sounding board consultants can also be helpful when a school is flourishing, wants to look ahead, and is uncertain which of many different good possibilities to prioritize. Again, through careful questioning, the sounding board consultant can help the leadership clarify the way ahead.

Of the tens of thousands of consultants, most tend to fall into one or two of the above categories. Occasionally, however, one can find a consultant with capability in several of these categories. These are not common, and a school must understand the trade-offs being made by gaining breadth of knowledge over depth of expertise. The most significant combination involves a field or subject matter specialist who also has sounding board or critical thinking expertise. These consultants are rare and valuable, because people with this combination of characteristics tend to be running organizations rather than consulting for them. In Christian ministry, consultative ability generally arises from a combination of training, ministry experience, life formation, and most importantly, spiritual maturity, what Robert Clinton describes as “Convergence” (Clinton 1993).

Which consultant do you need?

A school needs to determine what kind of specialist it needs at this time and in this place and whether it is preferable to have a local consultant with intimate knowledge of the context, or whether there is benefit to having someone come from further afield who brings paradigmatically different perspectives. Choosing the right consultant is more likely to lead to the desired outcomes. Equally, for consultants, knowing when you are suitable and when you lack necessary competencies will enable successful work with the school.

The following checklist might provide some guidance:

What type of consultant should an organization seek?	
<i>Foundational Need</i>	<i>Type of Consultant</i>
Are you entering a new field or type of ministry?	Field or pioneering specialist
Are you trying to reduce expenses in your school or to increase the efficiency with which your school functions?	Process consultant
Is one section of your school struggling to meet objectives, not communicating with the rest of the school, or floundering in the delivery of its services?	Functional consultant
Are the members of your school strong on general information but not up to speed on the latest technologies or techniques available in a particularly important element of the ministry?	Subject matter specialist
Are you thinking about making some radical changes to your leadership or management team, or making strategic ministry changes that you don't want to share with the rest of your leadership team just yet?	Sounding board consultant
Are you stymied by a new concept or development?	A subject matter specialist probably knows too much of the nuts and bolts, so a sounding board consultant would likely be better here.
Are you convinced of the value of your ministry but experiencing difficulty engaging the community in a positive way?	Critical thinking consultant

The Character of a Good Consultant

For the consultancy process to be fruitful, schools need to be on the lookout for consultants of good character, and consultants need to know themselves and understand the characteristics of a good consultant. Expertise alone is insufficient. Good consultants are committed to a school's needs and agendas rather than presenting pre-planned packages.

Above all, schools and consultants must realize the highly relational nature of the process. Particularly in theological education in relational societies, consultants are more likely to be successful if they focus on emotional intelligence and spiritual guidance over practical advice, even while acknowledging that they have been invited because of their expertise.

As school leaders read the character description below, they must recognize how much the consultant needs from the school for the process to be fruitful. A consultant does not simply come in to tell the school what to do; a consultant comes to listen primarily – so those at the school must be ready to speak honestly, boldly, clearly, and in Christian love. If those at the school do not own the process, the consultant's final recommendations likely will not truly fit the school's needs – and all the time, money, and effort will be wasted. Schools who participate fully reap the most long-term benefits from consultancy.

Quality consultants are characterized by:

- *Research*: Good consultants do not begin their consultancy on arrival but take time beforehand to research a school's history, demographics, and local societal challenges. While this information will inevitably be general, it can provide basic parameters to guide the visit. Oftentimes, the school can provide valuable documentary information – such as the results of a recent accreditation visit or field research that they have conducted. Open sharing (by the school) and careful reading (by the consultant) of this material provides a significant head start for the consultancy visit.
- *Politeness*: People appreciate good manners (though courtesy is always culture-specific). From the consultant, a letter of thanks in advance to the person at the school who invited you will establish good rapport. The consultant should thank the school for their hospitality both verbally and in writing following the consultancy. Depending on the cultural context, a small gift to the school may also be appreciated. Schools may give a small gift-souvenir to a consultant. Consultants should note that the extent of thanks they express is context-specific, and they do well to ask the individual hosting them at the school whether they should open the gift in public and/or express thanks.
- *Listening*: When a consultant arrives at a school, the starting point should be to be quick to listen and slow to speak. The temptation for those of us with expertise is to speak too soon. However, we cannot adequately

provide wisdom and guidance unless we first listen patiently and delve deeply into the school's relationships and systems. In some ways, consultancy is a form of "institutional therapy," so the basics of reflective listening ("What I hear you saying is ...") are often a strategic element for guiding the school. Careful listening establishes the consultant's credibility by demonstrating resonance with the school's needs and aspirations rather than simply bringing a personal agenda. Many consultants struggle to listen, particularly if there has been financial outlay to get them there: a consultant can easily feel pressure to deliver a result in a short period. They do well to clarify that their work is a stage in a process and that its results may not be very visible. Often, the greatest gift a consultant can give to a school is to raise questions rather than give answers, even if the consultant has few tangibles to show at the end.

- *Asking the right questions:* Quality consultants assume that they *do not* understand the institution in which they find themselves, so they will not give any "answers" until they have asked a plethora of questions. Good questions include the basics: Who? What? When? Where? Why? These questions should be asked in advance of the consultant's visit but continue to be significant upon arrival at the school. As responses come, a good consultant can quickly grasp the key issues and step back to see the big picture – playing the role of synthesizer more than analyst.
- *Focus:* Throughout research and listening, consultants must pay attention. Careful listening can be exhausting, but it is key, particularly in the early stages of the process.
- *Silence:* As they begin to make suggestions, consultants must be comfortable with silence to allow those at the school to process what they are saying. When others process what the consultant says, they will more likely own their responses and actions.
- *Humility:* Consultants must have the humility to accept refusal and opposition. Change will only come when the school is convinced of what the consultant advises. Often, consultants are unaware of factors that make it difficult or even impossible to implement their suggestions. A non-threatening pathway may be to offer suggestions that have worked elsewhere and then provide space to discuss why the idea might not work in this specific context and what elements of the idea might be feasible.
- *Cultural sensitivity:* A consultant must be aware that most methods are not readily transferable across cultures. Therefore, a consultant needs to present suggestions tentatively, asking advice about how the ideas might be adapted locally. Someone who has multicultural experience can be a significant asset, as they can help facilitate intercultural communication.
- *Paraklesis:* Throughout the process, the consultant must prioritize the school's agenda, not their own. Consultancy is a *parakletic* process in which the consultant comes alongside with encouragement, exhortation, challenge, and consolation and points to possible ways forward.

Beginning with the school's own questions and agenda empowers the school to choose the plan that will best suit its local needs – and the consultant will see most change when participants have discovered their own solutions to their own problems. So a consultant's best role is not to give answers as the expert but to help the school develop its own answers to challenges.

- *Prayer and faith:* The spiritual dimension must never be lost. Consultants should pray with and for those whom they serve, and they must trust God's sovereignty. In addition, consultants need to ensure their personal spiritual well-being. The "wisdom that comes from above" (James 3:17) emerges from openness to hear God speak.

The Process of Consultancy

A consultancy usually moves through five stages (Block 2011). I describe the process below from the school's point of view, with notes to consultants about key themes along the way.

1. *Entry:* The first phase is the initial contact, when you invite the consultant to work with your school. During this phase, you at the school should:
 - Listen to the consultant and be receptive to them as they seek to build trust. Above all, a quality relationship is crucial for success.
 - Arrange timing and logistics for the consultant's visit.
 - Establish terms, including the extent to which the consultant's role is only advisory, or whether you expect them to do some sort of intervention. Perhaps you just want the consultant to advise on a personal basis, with a very open agenda. Or maybe you want the consultant to observe the school and reflect on what they see. Or perhaps the school has a specific problem, and you don't know how to solve it. In one situation I know of, the consultant only discovered upon arrival that the problem he had been contacted to address actually required police intervention, and the school expected the consultant to mediate between it and the government. So having clear understanding in advance is crucial.
 - Confirm plans and expectations in writing in order to safeguard the school and the consultant. Clear expectations can mitigate misunderstanding and conflict. In particular, clearly define when you consider the consultant's job to be "done."
 - Supply the consultant with information, as they request, so that they can undertake an initial exploration of the problem and determine whether they are the right consultant for the job.
 - Respond to the consultant as needed as they develop ideas for the best way to start.

- Prepare the school's faculty, students, staff, board, etc. for the consultant's in-person visit. The consultant is "invading the school," and some may resent this invasion. Yes, the consultant is coming by invitation, but their conversations may be difficult, and participants at the school may be reticent to speak, concerned that they may say something inappropriate. You need to tell those involved explicitly that it is acceptable for them to talk freely to the consultant.

When consultants describe their worst disasters, they usually see that the problem lay in the initial phase. If you wish to make the most of the consultant's wisdom, you need to be open, responsive, honest, and clear to help avoid misunderstandings down the road.

2. *Discovery:* During this phase, the consultant asks question after question after question. Participants at the school should answer fully and honestly. Only through extensive dialogue can the consultant gain an accurate sense of the problem or situation, so even when their questions may seem difficult or confusing, seek to work toward understanding. Very often, the consultant's greatest contribution is in helping you discover answers to the school's problems for yourselves. During discovery, the school should:
 - Enable the consultant to talk to stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, board, alumni, etc.). Those impacted by final decisions must participate in the discussions. Otherwise, ownership of the implementation process will be limited or even resisted.
 - Help the consultant develop checklists. As a part of research and listening, the consultant may have participants develop checklists of what is important to them: theological, educational, contextual, etc. Through these checklists, reflect on what elements are most important for your school, community, local churches, etc.
 - Respect appropriate times. Working with the consultant, keep meetings to a maximum of 6 hours per day. Consultancy is demanding, and the consultant (and you at the school) need time alone to reflect on each day's discussions.
 - *Note to consultants: Taking longer in your travel, including an overnight rest, can help you feel better prepared for the demands of consultancy.*
3. *Feedback:* For those at the school, knowing when to move from speaking to listening requires great wisdom (and, for the consultant, vice versa). Prepare to hear what the consultant says with a spirit of humility and grace. You have invited them to address a problem; therefore, you expect the consultant to advise you, but you should recognize that they need to do so with care, and that you will need to receive their words in the same spirit. Expect the consultant to begin by summarizing the key contours of what they have discovered, to ensure that they understand the situation – and be prepared to give gentle clarifications or corrections as needed. Only then can the

consultant recommend truly helpful strategies. To be ready to receive the consultant's feedback, you should:

- Be ready to share your own new insights first. The best insights are those generated by the school and its leaders, so the consultant will welcome your thoughtful responses to conversations.
- Prepare for resistance when the consultant gives feedback. The more emotionally costly the project, the more resistance you or others may feel, or the more resistance the consultant may encounter in general. You (especially the school's leader) must handle this resistance graciously and clearly before an appropriate decision can be made about how to proceed.
- In particular, be aware that particular challenges exist in cultures where those in leadership are seen as "untouchable," above criticism – and that you may be in such a culture. In these contexts, especially if you are the school's leader, you may need to prepare yourself and your administrative team to hear hard things.
- Look for a prioritized list of recommendations from the consultant. The consultant should limit major feedback to 3 or 4 actions. If they give a long list of recommendations, that can increase resistance to action. Instead, expect them to list a few key suggestions, followed by a clearly delineated secondary list of other areas that you may wish to consider later.
- *Note to consultants: Consultants are most fruitful when they rely on the direction of the Holy Spirit in when and what they speak. Especially in contexts where leaders seem to be "untouchable," affirm the school's leaders while pointing out positive pathways to the future. You do well to move from "critical thinking" to "constructive thinking" in the way you phrase your feedback.*

4. *Implementation:* After hearing the consultant's feedback, you must decide what to do next. The consultant can continue to help as you plan actions based on their feedback. Often, implementation begins with an "educational" event, in which potential changes are introduced to those who will most likely be impacted, or in which a wider circle of stakeholders is informed of the consultancy recommendations and is given the opportunity to contribute to plans.

- *Note to consultants: This is the moment in which the consultant must be able to "dance" – to know when to lead and when to follow.*

5. *Extension or Termination:* Once the consultancy is completed, you need to decide whether the consultant's involvement with the school should continue. As noted above, it can be helpful to stipulate the end point of the consultation in the entry phase. Then the decision for continuation would be implicit, a simple yes or no, and if yes, for what period and in what form. Sometimes, in

the process of attempted implementation, deeper problems emerge, and you sense that further involvement of the consultant is called for – either virtually or in person – to pursue key issues at the next level. Or it may be that another kind of consultant is needed for the next phase, and the first consultant can help you identify and pass the baton to someone better qualified for the next phase. If the consultancy was a success, further engagement may be unnecessary, as you believe that you have what you need to move forward. Or if the visit was a “failure”, termination will likely occur, as you do not see value in pursuing the consultative relationship.

- *Note to consultants: Whatever happens, the consultant should follow up relationally with expressions of ongoing care, even when future engagement may be limited. Keep in mind that, most likely, some level of benefit occurred, whatever the perceived outcome – if not for the school, then for you.*

The Value of Being an Outsider

Schools and consultants should recognize the value of having (or being) an outside perspective and should find ways to leverage that gift:

- *Distance:* While the members of a school are best placed to understand that school, over time, systemic blindness can set in. People become so used to the way things are that they are unaware of how dysfunctional their processes can be. Often, negative patterns become self-reinforcing. A consultant can offer alternate approaches.

While finding healthy new alternatives should be the work of the Board, some Boards do not fully understand their role in providing accountability, constructive thinking, and vision to the organization’s leaders, in which case consultancy is often of particular value. However, the Board and other significant stakeholders remain crucial, and the consultant’s work should always involve the Board. Indeed, the Board is most likely to be the group that has a unique inside/outside perspective, as they are part of the school yet have potential for critical distance.

- *Speaking the truth:* The consultant comes and then goes and therefore is in a better place to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Genuinely loving the institution and its people while maintaining distance is one of the greatest challenges facing the Christian consultant. One way to do this is to find the people in the school who are already aware of problems and potential solutions but who do not feel free to speak their minds. A consultant can encourage them, empowering them to use their preexisting expertise to implement healthy change. Bringing in an outside “prophet” can give voice to the “prophets” who are already present within the organization (Mark 6:4).
- *Network of ideas:* Global experience enables a consultant to see broad relationships. A consultant can “give permission” to a group to do

something totally new to their context, but tested and successful in another, that better serves their needs. Often, members of the school may be unaware that comparable approaches already exist elsewhere.

Some Final Words

While a single consultant can offer much, particularly where the school's needs are specific, an even more effective consultancy is "collective consultancy," in which two or more consultants bring varying expertise to a situation. One example is an accreditation team that ideally includes a variety of process and function specialists. Together, they can assess and recommend new practices across the school. Because the key to accreditation is capacity building, a good accreditation team will not only engage in assessment for quality assurance but will build on this assessment to advise, thereby helping the school to consider ways to strengthen their work.

The success or failure of consultancy hinges on having the right people in the right situation. When this takes place, the possibilities for creative growth are enormous. Both the school and the consultant benefit from an awareness of the consultancy process and from successfully matching expertise to institutional needs. The process of consultancy can play a vital role in guiding schools towards better serving God's Kingdom purposes.

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