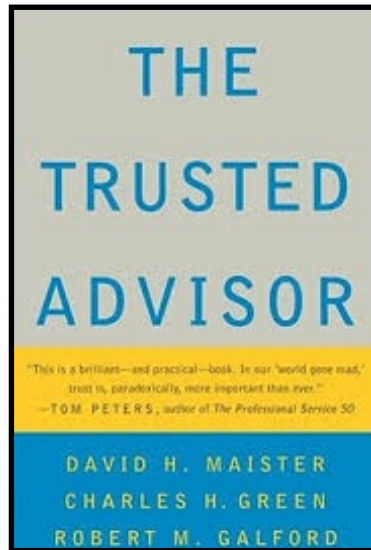




David Maister On Consulting And Trust

BY GREGORY PETERSON

I've been a devotee of “guru to the gurus” David Maister for almost a decade. So when he wrote about the finer points of advice-giving, it became required reading for my staff...

Maister's “The Trusted Advisor” is directly relevant to questions about the most important skills for consultant success today. The authors (who jointly possess more than a little knowledge about the current state of service firm management around the world) make this assertion:

“...it's probably fair to say that leading professional services firms have made (or are attempting to make) the adjustment to an approach that recognizes just how little content mastery matters if the client does not trust us. We would venture to say that truly great professional service firms haven't just made the adjustment to that approach; they are built upon it.”

At its core, “The Trusted Advisor” is about the authors’ assertion that “good advisors” are about more than “good advice.” Not that the authors denigrate (in any way) the importance of mastering one’s core subject matter. On the contrary, they see these core competencies as the absolutely critical foundation upon which a professional career is built – whether this knowledge is acquired before or after one takes a consulting position. But however necessary the “technical” skills are, Maister and his colleagues argue that these “hard” skills alone are not sufficient to ensure a consultant’s success.

“There are additional skills involved, ones that no one ever teaches you, that are critical to your success,” state the authors. But if these “lost” skills truly are critical to professional success, how is it that graduate schools and professional (business, law, accounting) firms are often failing to cultivate these capabilities? For one thing, these client-relations capabilities are relatively difficult to teach and test in a traditional academic setting – even in those institutions with an enlightened business curriculum. And in many professional service firm settings the culture often celebrates rainmakers who generate business from new clients – rather rewarding those who ably serve existing clients and earn additional projects from them.

But “The Trusted Advisor” is less concerned with assigning blame than it is in remedying the situation. The authors offer a prescription to develop and nurture the “soft” skills of earning client trust and learning how to give good advice. Theirs is a formula that is both theoretically sound and eminently practical.

The book begins by “raising the reader’s temperature” – that is, generating pathos by listing the many benefits that accrue (to an advisor) when a client trusts them. (Any serious consultant cannot look at this list without saying, “Yes, I really want these benefits; what must I do to achieve them?”)

Having gained a reader’s interest, the authors proceed to explore the nature of trust, the behavior of habits that can build interpersonal relationships, the finer points of advice giving – and a mathematical trust-evaluation equation that will persuade even the most rational counselor to consider addressing his/her style, as well as the content of that advice.

Truth be told, much of what’s proposed in “The Trusted Advisor” also has been suggested in any of several other books about the consulting experience. (Peter Block’s “Flawless Consulting,” for example is probably the best-read guide to the non-technical – or “process” – consulting skills.) Anyone who has billed more than a few hours as a consultant (in any field) will recognize the common-sense appeal that underlies many of the bromides from “The Trusted Advisor.” But what the book may lack in overall originality it makes up for in terms of the accessibility of its analysis and the immediate practicality of its prescriptions.

Maister, Green and Galford also add value by demystifying the emotional dimensions inherent in consulting and by wrapping together the panoply of related issues under the umbrella of a central unifying concept: “trust.”

It's ideas like this that plant the seeds of culture change in an organization. And by demonstrating (through their intimate, self-revealing writing) what they prescribe for others, the authors take risks and encourage us to do the same. Most notably, they risk talking about the "soft" side of consulting – that which involves emotions, uncertainty and the often-mysterious subtext that accompanies "the real work" in any given assignment. This book is powerful – since its logic is unassailable and its methods can so handily be implemented both by individuals, departments or entire firms. (This is not to underestimate the difficulty of organizational culture change, but to say that the concepts themselves are both accessible and scalable.)

Anyone interested in stretching their conception of what it means to achieve excellence in providing professional services will find a good start in "The Trusted Advisor." Next, they could invest time in the other Maister books mentioned above. Each of these texts provides what we all hope to hear from our trusted advisors: insightful, well-considered counsel that changes how we look at important issues in our professional – and personal – lives.

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