

CRAFT OF CONSULTING PODCAST

EPISODE 12: Shifting Your Mindset to Get Clients

I want to welcome you to Episode 12 of the Craft of Consulting podcast. Today's podcast is going to be a little bit different. You're just going to have me, and I'm going to be talking about something that is absolutely essential for new consultants and actually people that have been doing consulting for a while. This can also be something that's important to them, and that is mindset.

Now mindset, I'm sure you've heard a lot, because there's a lot of conversation about it out in the world. But what it is is it's your attitudes, your beliefs, the habits of thinking that you have that tell you what something is and what it isn't, who you are and what you aren't, and a whole host of other things. It's basically how you've set your mind to look at yourself and look at the world. It matters tremendously to consulting, because I've seen success or failure really hinge on having a right mindset. It also matters because there's a lot of folks that would truly want to be consultants, but because they have sort of the wrong mindset and that leads them to not take the right action, that they end up going back to a job even if that's not what they want to do.

So having the right mindset is really critical, and the good news is that mindset can actually be changed. What I'd say is, don't worry right now about what your current mindset is because we're going to talk about ways that you could shift that and start to move it in a direction that's going to lead to more success for you.

The two key mindset shifts that I'm going to talk about are: 1) getting comfortable with business development and getting comfortable with selling yourself, and 2) overcoming beliefs about scarcity, and specifically worry that there isn't going to be enough business for you or that you're not going to get enough business. Those are the 2 that I'm going to talk about today.

Let's start with getting comfortable with business development. This is really common for new consultants to have questions or concerns about business development like, "How am I going to get out there and get business and sell myself." And the reality is, is that most of us didn't actually have to do it in our previous jobs, depending on what type of consultant you were, so it's really new for us. You definitely have to get new skills and new knowledge to be able to do it well and comfortably, but you also have to undo any "I can't's" that you have in your head. So if you have, "I can't sell," "I can't do business development," "I can't go out there and talk to somebody who knows me and now I'm going to try and get them to pay me for what I used to do for them for free," so whatever the "I can't's" are in your head, why mindset matters is to be able to overcome those so that you can actually get to a point where you're comfortable with business development, you're comfortable selling, it's something that you can routinely do and do successfully.

What I tend to tell new consultants, and I truly, truly believe this, is that the heart of business development is knowing that there's a lot of people, businesses, organizations, whoever it is, that truly, truly need our help as consultants. Maybe it's just that they need the expertise that we have. It might be that they have some really great people sitting around the table, but they don't have somebody who has a particular expertise that they need, and maybe they can't hire it, but they really need it. You can come in as that expert and help them accomplish the things that they want to accomplish. Now, it could just be that they need a fresher, broader perspective, so they've got, again, good smart folks sitting around

the table, but they need someone to come in who can say, "You know, there's actually a different way to go at this. What we've seen work in other places and this, so let's look at that and see if there's anything in there that we can actually help you with." And just bring in something new and fresh, or latest examples from the field so it'll help them make choices.

Now a lot of times, it may be that they just need more hands on deck. They're short-staffed, they don't have enough people, they can't do the things that they need to do because they don't have enough people to do it, and you're going to come in as an extender and help them sort of fill out their staff and fill out their ability to accomplish their goals. A lot of times, I've seen this quite a bit, is sometimes they just need a consultant to come in who's going to speed things up. They may have the right people, they know what they want to do, they have the right idea, they just need it to happen faster, and part of what your role as a consultant is going to be is to help them do that. I often joke, and this is me being a complete nerd here for a second, that I'm kind of like an enzyme, and if anybody knows what enzymes are, enzymes actually speed up reactions. So sometimes I come in and my entire purpose is just to keep things moving forward at a much faster clip.

Now often, a lot of times, and sometimes it goes with these other scenarios too, they just need to sleep at night. They're stressed out, they got too much to do, they don't know how to do it, or they know how to do it and they don't have a clear way, and they just want somebody coming in who's going to help them, that they can offload or that they can take things off of their worry list and they can sleep at night. If you think about it, for any of us that used to be in regular employment, probably that used to be us. That used to be us who was worrying about having enough people on hand to do what we had to do, worrying about whether or not we had the right expertise. So we can certainly relate to what that's like.

When we translate that back to business development, really, all that business development and selling is in this context of being a consultant is just removing any obstacle that is in the way of you being able to show up and help a client. If your heart is in the right place, and it really is about helping people achieve what it is that they're actually trying to do or to make their lives easier or any of the other things that I mentioned, then it's a wonderful way to think about it. All you're trying to do is to get to them so that you can actually help them.

That's sort of the first part of thinking about how to shift your mindset about what it really is, that ultimately, it's about helping. But I always encourage new consultants, or anybody that's feeling stuck, to take that a step further and start to think about who you want to help in a very deliberate and detailed way. Now, what I don't mean is, I don't mean who your ideal client is, and I don't mean who you want to get business from. I would set those aside for right now. I truly mean, when you look out in the world, who is the type of person, what's an example of a person that you really want to help? I think it's an important exercise to go through that in a really detailed way. Imagine, what's their day-to-day life like? What types of things do they worry about? What stressors do they have at work that are weighing them down and often bringing them home? And the impact of that on their work and on their family.

I often like to ask the question like, what are their Monday mornings like? Or sometimes, for a lot of folks it starts early, so maybe they get the Sunday blues. What's that like for them? Are they eager and excited to show up at work, or do they really need some additional help that you might be able to help them with? I also like to imagine, what are their hopes and dreams? What are the things that they're

actually trying to accomplish or they're trying to make happen in their company or organization? And what are the types of things that I could actually do for them?

I think it's important to go over this in a detailed, nuanced way, because the more specific you can be, the more you can refer back to it later, so any time you're getting stuck and you start thinking again, "Oh, I can't sell," "I can't do business development," "I can't make people buy things from me." And whatever those are, our "I can't's" that get stuck in your head, you can go back to your understanding of who it is that you're trying to help and you can actually reorient yourself towards that, and that'll help you get past some of those sort of limiting thought patterns that'll get in the way of you doing business development. I actually really encourage folks to write this down, so that you have something to refer back to, and even change it. As you're out in the world and you're helping folks, who that person is might change, in which case it actually makes a lot of sense to go back and say, "OK, who is that person now?" Doing this can really help you set your mind and your heart right and get you past anything that's holding you back from doing business development and selling, which is an absolutely essential skill for anybody who's doing consulting.

The second common mindset issue that I want to talk about are feelings of scarcity, and that's worrying that there's not enough business out there for you and that you can't necessarily get that business because it's just not there. I want to be clear before I dig into this that there are some types of scarcity mindset that I'm not talking about.

I'm not talking about the mindset that comes from actually being in a prolonged state of having less or being deprived, like living in poverty. Definitely not talking about that. I also don't mean the notion of believing in abundance and that that belief alone will create abundance without you having to do something to create it, so that's also not what I mean.

What I really mean is perceived scarcity. These are the negative assumptions that we have and we hold about what the future is going to look like. It's the belief that because you don't have business today, you're never going to have business. It's the belief that there's not enough business out there for you. This is really common for a lot of consultants, actually, whether they're new or not to have those moments and sometimes a lot of moments of feeling that scarcity and that feeling vulnerable based on that notion that you have in your head that you're surrounded by scarcity.

The good news is, again, that mindsets can be changed. The goal in this mindset shift is not to reinforce those narratives or those habits of thinking that are not based on the realities of most markets or not based on your ability to get clients. Unless you're in a really narrow specialized field that is already flooded with consultants, which is not true for most consultants, or the market is just flooded, and you know that for certain, the reality is, in most markets, there's room for additional consultants, particularly fantastic ones to come in and do good work. Your ability to get clients is largely based on the things that you do, and you can make decisions about the things that you can do. There's no reason to have a notion in your head that, "Oh, my god. It's never going to work, and it's always going to be scarce." That's just a story you're telling yourself.

What I like to do rather than creating a narrative or I like to call sometimes building a case that makes it feel like scarcity is more than what it actually is, which often it's just a feeling and that's OK. We have feelings, and they come and go, it's nothing to hold on to, or it's just a reaction to whatever your present reality is as a consultant. Maybe it is, well, you don't have any clients or you don't have a whole bunch of

clients right now, but it's not assuming that it's always going to be that way, and that's just going to be your reality from now on because the problem is, is if you get stuck in that, a couple of things can happen.

The first thing, and sadly I've seen this, is it can make you believe that the only way that you can be successful is to work at a regular job, to not be a consultant, and, "Oh, my god, I gotta go get a job again," even if that's not what you want to do.

It can also cause you, and this is where I get into a little bit of what the science of psychology talks about in behavioral economics of which I am not an expert, but they say some really important things, which is that if you have a scarcity mindset, it can cause you to overvalue the immediate benefits that you see right in front of you and block out future benefits and get in the way of you doing the things that you need to do to build the business you want over the long term.

Paying attention to the future, your brain actually has to have what's called cognitive resources to do that. That's like the brain power or the bandwidth to be able to think about and look to the future and do things that are really important to build a consulting business. It gets in your way because you just don't have enough bandwidth to do it because it's all caught up in the scarcity mindset so you don't have time for things like planning or investing in the growth of the business or problem solving and all the things that are essential for you to build the business that you want.

I'm going to redo that. The problem is that if you get stuck in that, it can do a couple things. The first thing it can do, and sadly, I've seen this more times than I ever want to, is it can make you believe that the only way that you can actually be successful is to work in a regular job, and, "Oh my God, I better go back to that job because this just isn't going to work." That's all based on what you have in your head. It may be based on a few experiences, but it's largely based on the mindset that you have, and so even if you want this life, you're going to deny yourself that because you've decided that you can't do it.

The other thing it can do, and this gets more into what the science of psychology and behavioral economics gets into, which I am not an expert in at all, but they say some really important things, which is that if you get stuck in the scarcity mindset, you can overvalue immediate benefits because you gotta take care of something right now because everything's scarce and you can't handle it. But what it can also do is it can block out how you think about future benefits, so it can block you thinking about the things that you need to do to actually be able to build your business in the long run.

How it works from a brain-science way, is in order to pay attention to the future and to think about what you need to do in the future, requires what they call cognitive resources. What psychology has shown is that the scarcity mindset depletes those cognitive resources. It actually reduces the brain power or the mental bandwidth that you have to do things like planning for the future, investing in the growth of your business, solving problems, all the things that you need to be able to do to build a consulting business. The problem is, is you might end up taking actions that aren't going to help you build your consultancy or aren't even going to help you in the short-term.

One of the things that I've seen quite a bit of is folks going after opportunities that don't make any sense for them to go after. One classic example is request for proposals or RFPs that come out, and if you're in a scarcity, mindset, "Oh my God, I gotta go after any opportunity that gets presented to me." The problem is, is I see folks go after that, even if it's not a fit for them and they have probably very little

chance or no chance at all of actually getting it, but the problem is, is for anybody that's actually done an RFP and responded to one, which I have, is it takes a ton of time and a ton of energy and effort to actually pull it off.

If you're doing that because you're responding to it based on a scarcity mindset, that means that you don't have the time and energy and effort to do the things that are most likely to yield results like paying attention and asking yourself, "Am I really describing my value in a way that is crisp and clear and compelling to potential clients? Am I doing networking with folks I know or that the folks I know connect me to?" The types of things that are more likely going to get you business both in the short-term and in the long-term.

I get it. I have complete empathy for this because I've had that feeling. I've definitely had the feeling that things will always be scarce, and it ain't fun. But what I prefer to do instead when those come up, and they still do occasionally come up, is I prefer to use those feelings and the feeling of vulnerability that comes along with it as a tool and as a motivator.

If anybody's familiar with Brené Brown, who's a researcher, and she researches vulnerability. I love her. I'm a big fan of vulnerability because I think it can be extraordinarily useful. How I use it is I get curious about what's happening and how I'm responding to it. My husband and I often ask ourselves questions like "do we know that this is true," and we ask ourselves that all the time about all kinds of different things. What that does is it keeps us from building stories, creating cases in our head based on emotions or based on assumptions because if we do that, we're probably not going to be able to take the right actions.

When I started, and I talk about this in my first episode of my podcast, my thing was, and I repeated it over and over and over again, which is, by the way, great for building a bad habit, is I said, "I have no idea how I'm going to get work." I was working at a firm, so it was also about getting billable hours. "I have no idea how I'm going to get my hours. I'm just not going to." I kept repeating that, and luckily, my husband's very helpful, and he was able to break that up a little bit so that I wasn't getting stuck into that mindset and I would focus instead on actually taking the steps that I did to do to get my business.

Then, of course, you fast forward actually not that much further into the future, and then I'm saying things like, "Ah, man, I have no how idea how I have so much work. How come I have so much work? This is too much," which, of course, he knew was going to happen. But if I hadn't gotten unstuck from that mind of scarcity, I wouldn't have been able to do the things I need to do to get to the point where I'm complaining about something else.

It gives you an opportunity to reflect on what reality actually is and what you're doing. As I said, it's also a motivator, can spur you to action. You can start asking yourself questions that are related to action, like should I be doing more of something, should I be doing less of something, should I switch it up and try something different because for some reason this isn't working?

My experience is the more you poke that feeling of scarcity and question it and kick the tires and all of that stuff, the easier it's going to be to shift that mindset towards something that's more aligned with reality, which is there's a lot of business out there, and there's a lot of ways that you can get clients and go do it as long as you got it clear in your head and you take the actions based on a really good solid mindset.

With both of the mindset shifts that I talked about, the key is really this: if you really like consulting, if that's the work life that you want to have... and I'm obviously a big fan. I think it's a fantastic addition to my life and way that I want to make my money, but if that's what you really want to do, then don't let made-up mindsets hold you back. Don't let them get in your way.

Take advantage of the fact that mindsets can be changed. That's a huge gift, so take advantage of it. Pay attention to the things that you're thinking. How is it that you're holding things in your head? What's the chatter in your head saying, and don't assume it's true. Question your beliefs and reject those negative assumptions that creep up that really end up just being chatter in your head.

If you don't dig into the ways of thinking and get stuck and if you're able to reframe how you view things to match reality and to connect with your why, why is it that you're doing this work, and then you're able to take that mindset and be able to make decisions about the right actions to take, take those actions, and take the ones that are most likely to yield results. You can do that while attending to your immediate circumstances. If you don't have clients today or you don't have enough clients today, you still want to get the mindset right so that you're making good choices, but you also want to look forward to the future and think about what type of consultancy you want to build whether you're independent or in a firm, and take that right action to do that because you got your mindset right.

Thank you very much for joining me in this episode. This is a topic that is near and dear to me because I have put it into practice and it's been enormously contributory to my success as a consultant. I constantly have to remind myself to keep in mind, it's not one and done. You always have to just check in on your mindset, make sure that it's right.

Thank you, again. Next week I am going to have someone that I interview again. It's going to be a fantastic episode, so please join me, and hit subscribe so you don't miss any episodes. You can also go to Craftofconsulting.com. If you haven't been there yet, there's a whole lot of information and tools that can help you both excel at consulting but also make sure that you ultimately get the life that you want.

Thanks for joining me again. I'll talk to you next time. Bye-bye.