

# Knowledge Worker

## Consulting DNA: Diagnosis, Negotiation, Action

(April 2013)

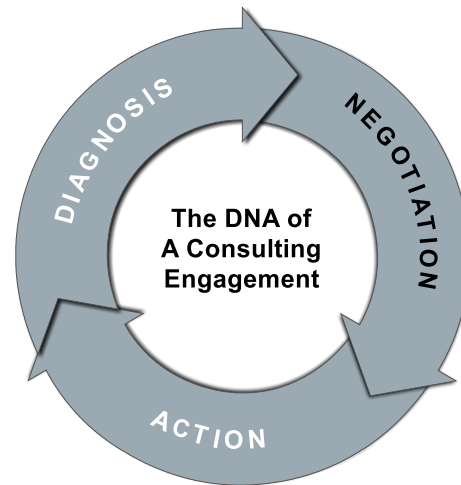
Diagnosis, Negotiation and Action are the DNA of successful consulting engagements. Are you facile with all three?

**Diagnosis.** Diagnosis is the initial challenge of a consulting engagement. The early-stage investigative activities lead to the clear identification of the issues facing a client. A sound diagnosis clarifies the current situation, helps all understand why it exists, identifies the results to be achieved, and determines what has to change to realize those results. A diagnosis should not be set in concrete; it should be open to revision and updates when new data appear – and they will.

**Negotiation.** Negotiation occurs throughout a consulting engagement. It must because facts morph, emotions evolve, and understandings and expectations change as well. Resolved issues are reopened; unforeseen issues arise; key players leave; and regime changes change everything. Some negotiations are formal, others informal, but all have the aim of reaching agreement about one or another aspect of the engagement. Several negotiated and often renegotiated engagement elements are critical:

- Outcomes/Results
- Products/Deliverables
- Methodologies/Activities
- Schedules
- Staffing
- Responsibilities/Accountabilities
- Budgets
- Assessment/Evaluation

**Action.** The technical term for actions devised by a consultant is “intervention,” which means “to change things with an outcome or purpose in mind.” Consultant actions may be strategic or tactical, they might focus on a particular function, department or division (e.g., HR, Operations, Marketing, IT, etc.), or they might focus on a particular business process. The consultant might be in a hands-on, take-the-lead mode or simply providing advice and counsel. The consultant might have been brought in to deliver a particular solution (conduct training, re-engineer the decision-making processes, develop a strategic plan, etc.) or to help the client figure out what needs to be done



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Examining each DNA element at length would take a much longer article or a book. The ongoing nature of Diagnosis and Negotiation throughout the consulting engagement means understanding and agreements will change, leading to course corrections in Action. Successful engagements are fluid and that calls for resilience as an essential strength for consultants.

To illustrate, I was once engaged to “overhaul” a financial services company’s customer service center. I had been on-site barely a week when I was asked to take on a different and more important project: to develop a new, computer-based system to support the roll-out of a complicated, new, investment-based financial product. The project was a success and, to many, a surprising one as well. As an EVP of marketing put it, “I went to bed one night, got up the next morning and there was the new system. How the devil did you do that?” I answered, “We were flexible and responsive.” We paid attention to our DNA along the way. Diagnosis proceeded in parallel with Negotiations and Action. We were action-oriented: we adopted short-interval scheduling and dispensed with formal reporting. In short, we were resilient and did what needed doing at the time.

So think about your own consulting engagements in terms of this DNA. What kind of diagnosis was done? Where were negotiations formal and where were they informal? What actions grew out of that diagnosis and the subsequent negotiations? What had to be renegotiated? What kinds of course changes proved necessary? Did you have the lead or were you in an advisory role? And if you’re looking at an upcoming engagement, how will Diagnosis, Negotiation and Action play out there?

### About the Authors

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