Inside Consulting: My Time at Altman Vilandrie

Michael Plasmeier

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Over IAP, I had the privilege of working for Altman Vilandrie and Company, a Boston-based management strategy consulting firm. I selected this externship because I wanted to understand how consulting works. I wanted to see if I would enjoy the job full time. In addition, the management consulting industry has a reputation for having high performing teams. I wanted to understand how a consulting team operates and what aspects of the team make it a high performing team. These lessons could be used in the design or evaluations of other teams.

During my time at Altman Vilandrie, I was staffed on three projects. The first two weeks I worked on a data center market analysis with two other consultants. During the third week, I worked on another data center market analysis with one of the consultants I had worked with previously. During the final week, I worked on the competitive analysis for a large Multichannel Video Programming Distributor (MVPD) (essentially a cable or satellite provider) with a different team.

This paper analyzes the project teams that I worked on at Altman Vilandrie & Company and it attempts to answer what aspects make a team high-performing. This paper analyses the teams using the 3 “lenses” proposed by John Carroll (2006) to investigate how the team operates and how those aspects might be considered to be high performing. First, this paper looks at my work experience through a strategic design lens that focuses on the formal structure of the consulting teams I was a member of. This paper then analyzes the teams through a political lens. This paper will focus on a disagreement I had with another member of my team and how I reacted in order to make my ideas heard. Finally this paper will review the culture of the Altman Vilandrie consulting teams I was on.

**Strategic Design Lens**

In the management consulting industry, companies or other organizations purchase professional services from consulting teams. These teams are usually made up of between 3-7 people and work on a project anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. Unlike many other jobs, consulting work on a project basis – there is a clear start and end to a project. When a project ends, everyone is split up and is reassigned onto a new team.

The consulting industry is very hierarchical in terms of title and rank. Undergraduates start as “analysts,” a role that is typically occupied for a number years. MBA students start as “consultants.” Larger project may then be managed by a “project manager.” Finally, projects are overseen by “principals.” At some firms, there is a strict promotional schedule where you eligible for a promotion. At this point many firms also have an up or out policy that you must be promoted or let go. Although other companies may have different names for each role, they share a similar hierarchical structure. Each role has a defined set of responsibilities. For example, principals are responsible for recruiting business, dealing with clients, and giving the final presentation. They are not generally involved day to day in the project. Analysts are responsible for much of the detailed research that is needed in the project.

However, at the teams I was on at Altman Vilandrie, there was not a strict division of work. The first team I was on was made up of two consultants. Because they did not have an analyst on their team, the consultants did the research work. In addition, on both of teams I was on, we would discuss issues as a team. At that point, I felt that we were a team of equals – I felt that all members could provide their input on insights on what they thought the problems and solutions were.

I thought that consulting has a good mix of both hierarchical strictness and internal flexibility in work. The hierarchy puts newer members closer to the actual work, while the more experienced people supervised the work. However, they still welcome the opinion of the lowest ranking members of the team. In addition, the principals pitched in during time crunches and were willing to do work they would not normally do. This helped the team achieve the best possible output product.

**Political Lens**

Individual members of the team had different interests and priorities. The political lens decomposes the goals of an organization’s goals into the goals of individuals. These may be the same as the organization’s goals or they might be separate. From my experience, every member of the team wanted to solve the client’s problem. However, different members of the team had different ideas on how to accomplish that. I will speak more about a disagreement I had with a member of my team later in the paper.

In general, members are motivated by receiving a promotion and/or bonus at the end of the year. Interns and externs are motivated by being offered a full time job. Principals are motivated more directly by attempting to satisfy clients so that they want to rehire the firm. This makes people want to work hard to get the project done well.

After each project, there was a formal evaluation that was done by the person above you in the hierarchy. The evaluations were four pages and contained many subscores that were graded on a 1-5 scale. No subscore I received was above a three; however, I was told that I did very well for an intern. There seems to be a greater context in the way that scores were issued. My score must have been issued in comparison to the scores that my reviewer had previously received himself, previously given, or reviewed. However, the context seemed different from my other experiences with performance evaluation systems on a 1-5 scale. First, the scores were on the low end of the range. From my experience, scores below a 3 are very rare, unless the person do a very poor job. At Altman Vilandrie there seemed to be a “glass ceiling” where interns could not score about a three on any subsection. This points to a larger political context in which the scores were issued.

Evaluations are an important characteristic of high performing teams. It is important that team members know where they can improve. However, team members must be informed about the context in which the scores are issued, so that they can understand the scores.

**Cultural Lens**

During my month in consulting, I was able to observe the attitudes of management consultants first hand. I observed how consultants present to each other and to the client.

One of the consultants I worked with treated the hierarchy very formally. He only talked to the principal when absolutely necessary. Even though it was only internal, he would still try to prepare polished work for the principal. However, on the other team I was on, people did not seem to share as strong an aversion to talking informally with the people higher up on the hierarchy.

In addition, talking to the client was very formalized. The team would send questions to a single member of the team. He or she would then put the questions together in a single email and send it off to the client.

Having a hierarchy allows each person to focus on their part, without becoming too involved in other people’s work. However, a lot of time was spent polishing slides, just to change them again later. In addition, this culture reduces the cohesiveness between the team members, reducing the flow of information. This might result in a well presented, but poor recommendation to the client. A high performance team needs to strike the right balance of how much its members interact.

**A Political Conflict**

During my second project I had a conflict with the senior analyst on my team. He and I had significant disagreements in the facts of the project, the direction we should research in, and the emerging recommendation for the project. I felt like we disagreed on almost every aspect. My experience here shows how politics can affect someone’s work and prevent a team from reaching its high performing potential.

First, we disagreed about the technical facts of a system. The other analyst thought that something was technically possible; when I was pretty sure it was not. This disagreement annoyed me because I believed the answer was pretty clear. This feeling was exacerbated because I thought I was better qualified to think about the technical merits of the system. While I had a technical background, the other analyst did not. He was a history graduate at Harvard.

We also disagreed on where to spend research time. I thought that a bit of technical research was important, so that we could better understand our client’s motivation of building the system. Understanding their motivation would help us hypothesis about why there were asking the question they hired us to answer and the type of answers that there were really looking for.

The senior analyst and I also disagreed on how to present and format research. He thought that it would be good to have an Excel spreadsheet of the data. He believed that was what the project manager was expecting. I thought using OneNote was a good idea. I tried using Excel, but I just found it too limiting and slow. I switched to OneNote. When I presented my work to the project manager, she really liked the use of OneNote as a research tool.

These incidents caused me to mistrust my other team member. Whenever he was giving me direction on what to work on next, I felt belittled. This was not good for my feelings or for the team.

To try and get my ideas adopted by the team, I talked directly to the project manager, bypassing the senior analyst. The project manager liked my ideas and adopted them, shaping the project. By bypassing the senior analyst, I was able to achieve my goal of influencing the project in the direction I thought it should go. I played politics to make my voice heard

However, the disagreement worked against having a high performance team. In a high performance team, you should have people who disagree. However, team members should never feel like they are not being listened to, or made to feel that they are always wrong. This breeds discontent in the team that reduces the team’s effectiveness as communications breaks down. Team members should also recognize when a person has expertise in an area. When a team member with background in an area is confident about an answer, then that answer should be accepted or actual research should be conducted. Teams should feel comfortable experimenting with new ways of doing things, in case a more efficient method could be found. In order to think about different ways of accomplishing a task, everyone on the team should know the goal that the group is trying to achieve.

**Putting the Lenses Together**

During my time at Altman Vilandrie and Company, I saw aspects contributing to and detracting from a high performance team. The structural design of consulting teams is almost ubiquitous across the consulting industry. Team members are motivated by trying to get to the next level of the hierarchy. The hierarchical design allows each team member to focus on their section when preparing work, but the collective intelligence of the team is used when solving problems or when the team is up against a deadline. Teams cannot be considered only as a whole, but must also be considered as a group of individuals. Each team member has their own idea about how they think the project should end up. Team members can use politics – such as bypassing a layer of the hierarchy – in order to get their view adopted. On one hand, organizational tools, such as personal evaluations are helpful to assess team members’ performance. However, team members must be aware of the context that the scores are issued in. What might be a good score in one place is a very bad score elsewhere. Overall, by looking at organizations from different lenses, one can better understand how an organization operates and what aspects contribute to an organization’s success.

References

Carroll, J. S. (2006). Introduction to Organizational Analysis: The Three Lenses.