

Six Ideas to Improve Nonprofit Consulting

In many circles, “consultant” seems to be a dirty word. Perhaps only lawyers have a worse reputation as cash cows. I’m guessing [House of Lies](#) hasn’t helped that reputation, but at the heart of the stigma, as I see it, is a frustration at how much money consultants cost versus the impact they deliver. We can’t seem to live without them (it’s nearly impossible for any organization to sustain every capacity it could possibly need internally), but this doesn’t warm the general feeling about having to actually use them.

Despite the fact that I myself am a consultant, I’ll admit I’ve carried this secret stigma. I am proud of the work that I do, am obsessed with making an impact, but am also secretly afraid of what the label connotes: large invoices, minimal contact with the client, a shiny glossy report on the shelf, and me on to the next big score.

This is why I welcomed the opportunity to work with [Eugene Eric Kim](#) helping Shiree Teng run a collective exploration into how the field of nonprofit consulting is currently delivering impact in the sector, and to find opportunities to increase our impact.

Shiree suspected that the process of finding a good consulting match needed updating, and she wondered about potential online resources to address this need. We took a step back from this possible solution and turned to the field to uncover more about the problem, asking:

- How are nonprofits currently finding, working with, and evaluating consultants?
- What are possible opportunities to improve the field?

We worked with [CompassPoint](#) to deliver a [survey with explored](#)

[the first question](#), then [hosted a design workshop](#) to explore the second. We interviewed consultants we respect to help inform the survey, we hosted focus groups to validate the resulting data, and we brought together a diverse group of stakeholders (nonprofits, consultants, funders) to make meaning of the results together and brainstorm possible solutions in a fun design competition.



What struck me most on March 7 – as 30 diverse, intelligent, and motivated individuals dedicated an entire day to exploring how we can make nonprofit consulting transformational – was how much this group of people cared. The *House of Lies* stigma about consulting might be based on certain realities, but it is not this reality. These folks get up every day to make an impact. Clearly there is huge potential in the field, and simply creating the space for shared learning around what's working well and what could be improved proved powerful.

What was also striking, although not surprising, was how much funders, nonprofits, and consultants all share responsibility for the state of the sector. It was clear that a perspective focused on partnership is powerful in helping consulting / nonprofit relationships achieve success.

Finally, it was evident that there are small things we can

start doing right now that will make a difference. At the workshop we hosted a design competition, and all six groups came up with potential products that could help shift the nonprofit / consultant relationship immediately. I'd love to share those six ideas here:



- [Bill of Rights](#). Not only did this team charm the group with an entertaining skit, they were able to provide an immediately useful bill of rights and responsibilities. The theory is that if we sit down and have a conversation about this bill of rights at the beginning of every engagement, we'll be more successful. I haven't tested the hypothesis, but I think they're onto something, and I'd love to see a larger dialogue around this bill of rights.
- [Everybody needs a coach!](#) This team developed a training program to spread the important capacity of coaching to a more diverse set of practitioners. They want to normalize coaching in the nonprofit sector. While we wait for this program to launch, we can explore resources on their wiki page above.
- [Are you ready?](#) This team developed a tool to help nonprofits determine if they are really ready for a consulting engagement, highlighting the importance of nonprofit readiness. They even thought through some tough questions about distribution! The "are you ready" tool is a button that's prominently displayed on common sites and takes you through a series of reflective questions.

- [Idealist.org meets Match.com](#). This team is bringing us the best of [Idealist.org](#) and online dating to help nonprofits find the right consultant. We all agreed they may be on to something powerful, and are excited to see where [Shiree Teng's explorations and passion](#) might lead next.
- [Toolkit for reflective processes](#). This is a deceptively simple tool that I can see myself using at the beginning of every engagement to help ensure I'm creating the space in the relationship for genuine partnership, thus setting up a project to be successful. Special kudos to our smallest team for providing an immediately actionable checklist I'm already using.
- [Go deeper learning package](#). This team envisions a package that consultants can use to help their work go deeper and ensure the nonprofits also learn from the engagement. The theory is that if we deepen the goals of any consulting engagement to include learning, and then provide a package that supports consultants in achieving this, nonprofit consulting engagements will be more transformative. The team showed a commitment to capacity building and learning that I for one would love to see spread.

I'd also like to thank the Packard Foundation for modeling a commitment to learning in community by hosting their [organizational effectiveness wiki](#). A common refrain after an invigorating workshop like the one we hosted last March is, "This was nice, but what does it mean for my work moving forward?" Having a resource like the Packard Wiki makes a big difference. Instead of the ideas from March 7 just existing in that room, we are able to share them with anyone who is interested. Now I can use the toolkit for reflective processes, or reach out to Belma Gonzalez to get [her help with coaching](#). It was a joy learning from this diverse and committed group of nonprofit leaders, and I sincerely hope this is just the beginning of our collective conversation.