
The Consultant's Calling: Bringing Who You Are to What You Do

Geoffrey M. Bellman (*Jossey-Bass,
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REVIEWED BY MARY ANN WOODRUFF

The *Consultant's Calling* is a warm, wry, engaging treatise on the art of being the person you want to be while thriving as a consultant, contributing to the world, and making friends. It's a tall order, and Geoff Bellman is up to the task.

Bellman is a nationally respected organization development consultant, writer (other books include *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge*, *Your Signature Path*, and *The Beauty of the Beast*) and speaker. It is hard to imagine anyone more successful than he has been at limiting his paid consulting practice while maintaining a high profile as an expert in doing this work well. He lives, to the core, the message of his book.

The book will appeal to newcomers who want to get off on the right foot in consulting, students whose teachers hope they will be finer and more self-aware in their work, mid-career consultants yearning for a better balance between

work and life, and experienced professionals of any stripe who seek to sharpen their focus and keep their creative juices flowing.

The first edition of *The Consultant's Calling*, published in 1990, quickly became a best-seller. Nearly a textbook on consulting skills, it offered easy-to-follow tips on how to be successful and, more significantly, issued a call to authenticity that continues to challenge and intrigue Bellman's readers.

Twelve years' maturity shows in this new and revised edition. Bellman has deepened and tightened his ideas. This new book, shorter than the first, reads like a conversation among trusted colleagues and is written for a wider array of consultants than the OD and HR specialists to which the first edition was directed. Its basic premise is the same: Consulting is a high calling full of zest and meaning, requiring practitioners to bring all of themselves to it, while keeping it in balance with all that they want from life.

I read the book as one of those experienced consultants who's beginning to ask, "is that all there is?" I'm tired. In the last year I've occasionally done work on automatic pilot, helping my clients while counting the hours until I can go home. I believe my clients do not suspect this—yet. I know this is not fair to them or to

me. I long to regain the zeal that energized my work for years or to redefine my work so it sings to me. *The Consultant's Calling* gave me the push I needed.

Finding Your Right Work

Socrates said it first: "Know thyself." Bellman might say that right work (which changes over a career) germinates in the soil of rigorous self-knowing. He stimulates such knowing by inserting powerful step-by-step explorations at key points in his book, giving us a chance to dive experientially into the contents.

How Am I Unique?

Bellman starts with this question, and insists we ask this about ourselves as whole persons, not about us as consultants. What are the qualities, traits, ambitions, styles, goals, characteristics that define what is unique about us, he asks? Make a list. Once we have that list, ask some family members and friends the same question, "How am I unique?" If this feels uncomfortable, Bellman reminds us that clients are asking this question all the time when they are deciding whether or not to hire us.

I followed this exploration, made my list, and then asked others for their perspectives. I liked much of what I heard; some things surprised me. I saw patterns that resonated with what I know is the

work I want to do. Some of this work I am ready to do right now, some will require development. Best of all, I identified places to polish and use my natural capacities to do work I would love to do. I can feel the juices flowing.

But the book is about bringing *all* of who we are to what we do.

Searching Your Shadows

Like a wise counselor, and leading by example, Bellman urges his readers to unmask and befriend their shadows. Again he presents a useful exploration to assist. He encourages us to reflect on the past year's work, note what has gone well, what didn't go so well, what was on our mind, and how we felt at the time. He recommends getting acquainted with what makes us uncomfortable, worries us, gives us what my mother used to call the three-in-the-morning jimjams. Once we describe to ourselves what it is we repeatedly worry about, consider what we do to keep clients from knowing about this worry of ours and how much energy we put into keeping it secret. Bellman suggests that we write all of this down and then read our paper twice daily, morning and evening, for at least five days. His objective is simple: to increase our awareness of what we choose to do and the impact of our choices.

Do I really want to know, I asked? I persisted and even got to the point of laughing at the lengths I go to hide my own games and dissembling. Bellman's willingness to share his own shadow helped me face my own dark sides without dropping me into the abyss of self-loathing that can paralyze.

The strength of this book lies in its expression of Bellman's integrity, which inspires us to reach more deeply for our own, to bring ourselves more fully and

authentically to light in service of creating meaning in life and work as we define meaning. His many practical tips—how to define and honor our boundaries around work, how to discuss fees with clients, how to build a client base of friends, what works and doesn't work in building sustainable change in organizations, how to manage our power ethically—are useful too, though other sources exist for such information. While I am critiquing, let me say I miss the bullet format that made the first edition so easy to use as a reference tool. I found the chapter on organizations overlong; a briefer statement of the main points and a reference to the author's *The Beauty of the Beast* would have been sufficient for me. I would rather focus on what is unique about *The Consultant's Calling*, the way it compels us to “get” ourselves, get out of our own way, and get on with what matters to us at whatever stage we are in life and work.

Bellman says that clients hire consultants for contribution, expertise, and perspective; they keep them because of authenticity and friendship. You may purchase this book to drink from the intellectual well of one of the masters, to tap his expertise and perspective—and you will not be disappointed. But you will mark up the lines and turn down the corners of its pages because of the way the genuineness of the man touches your soul. In the end, you will feel you have become his friend—and your own.

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