

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Consultants to Nonprofits Are Change Makers

By *Leah Reisman*

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To the Editor:

Consultants are crucial, supportive change agents in the ecosystem of philanthropy, yet we are so rarely written about. It is unfortunate that attention has come from “What Role Should Consultants Play in the Nonprofit World?” (July 28), by Leah Reisman.

We feel it is important for the *Chronicle's* readers to hear other expert voices on this topic as a balance to Ms. Reisman's article. As change partners, bringing deep expertise, broad experience, and incisive methods to help public-benefit clients rethink, restructure, and revitalize their organizations, consultants are a vital part of the nonprofit ecosystem.

We agree with Ms. Reisman that nonprofits and grant makers should be thoughtful about searching for and selecting consultants. Our organizations, the [National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers](#) and the [Alliance for Nonprofit Management](#),

are committed to promoting ethical, high quality, appropriate consulting. Many of our efforts foster this mission, including NNCG's code of ethical conduct and vetted directory of consultants and both organizations' professional development opportunities for our members and all of our colleagues in philanthropy.

We would be pleased to share some of our [knowledge and resources](#) with the readers of the *Chronicle* to balance out the perspectives represented in Ms. Reisman's piece. For example, the first and only — to date — national study of the role of philanthropic consultants (conducted by the Foundation Center and published in *Foundation Review* in 2015) found that 95 percent of the philanthropies that used consultants in the prior three years were highly satisfied by the contributions of these consultants and found their work to produce beneficial outcomes.

Consultants serve the entire nonprofit sector. Our ecosystem includes sole proprietors, small and mid-sized boutique firms, and large firms. The sophistication of our methods and quality of our connections may be or may not be related to the size of the enterprises we partner with. Many of NNCG's resources, such as our [DEI Toolkit](#) for consultants and our forthcoming resource piece on "Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy" and the Alliance's monthly webinars with leading change agents in the field are available to all consultants and nonprofits free of charge, regardless of the size of the consulting firm.

This feels like a time for our sector as a whole (funders, publishers, nonprofits, and consultants) to come together in dialogue and lean into the change we all seek to bring about in the world. In that spirit, we reached out to Ms. Reisman to discuss our reactions to her piece before submitting this letter, and we are glad she has been engaging with us.

Mary Phillips
President, GMA Foundations

Steering Committee Chair, National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers
Boston

Lisa McGill
Principal, LM Strategies Consulting
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Keith Timko
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New York

To the Editor:

Leah Reisman's doctoral research "suggests that many nonprofits' dissatisfaction with their consultants is related to inadequate communication in both directions. Members of the Association of Philanthropic Counsel concur with her finding. Clear and confirmed understanding of expectations, methods, and results define the best consulting engagements.

APC member firms, and many other advisers to the nonprofit sector, take pride in listening first to unearth the potential client's current needs and longer-term goals and aspirations. This clarifies expectations and helps us take projects where our skills sets will add value, innovation, and enhanced outcomes. If we cannot help, we refer the client to other service providers.

For nonprofit organizations considering a consultant, APC strongly recommends these steps to assure the most beneficial process.

- Take time to assess your needs and goals. You are seeking a solution to a problem, although sometimes the problem is you know something is wrong and want a consultant to help find it.
- Engage your board actively in the decision. They will be directly responsible for allocating resources to implement recommendations and need to be involved from the start.
- Read and think through the methodology the consultant presents. If methods aren't clear, ask for clarification. Responsive consulting agencies will provide details about how they do their work and why their approach addresses the challenge(s) your organization faces.
- Read and think through the timeline, or ask for one. APC members typically specify what will be completed by when, interim report dates, and what the final report will include. APC members also often include expectations for what the client will do and by when. This helps set a framework from Day One that can guide the entire engagement.
- Interview the applicant, or even better, several applicants, to ascertain their experience with your size, subsector, complexity, and needs.
- Ask for referrals and check the references. Ask about communications and work style, about timeliness, about results.
- Look for a good rapport with your consultant. Staff members and board representatives who work in partnership with a consultant will make time for extra work when there is shared priority, energy, and focus.

Each APC member firm seeks to help nonprofit leaders make decisions that advance the organization's mission. We take great pride in following ethical standards for consulting and serving organizations in the nonprofit sector with best-in-class guidance for fundraising, governance, strategic planning, proposal writing, and more. Part of our service includes helping charitable groups understand better how to engage our firms or any other consultant.

To all nonprofit leaders, thank you for the work you do and the mission your organization serves.

Melissa S. Brown

Chair, Association of Philanthropic Counsel

Dallas

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

[Leah Reisman](#)

Leah Reisman is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Princeton University.

RECOMMENDED READING
