

The Best Practices in Consulting initiative conducted interviews to highlight lessons learned by experienced practitioners as a resource for students and new practitioners. The experienced consultants highlighted several lessons, which notably included the importance of intentionally developing and utilizing professional and personal skills, as well as the benefits of establishing a network of peers and colleagues.

Personal and Professional Skills

Quality of Work and Work Ethic

Consultants stressed the importance of doing good work and having a strong work ethic as critical qualities for new and developing professionals in the field (Clark, Harris, Holliday, Lifrak, Mugford). Just as clients are advised, it is essential that aspiring consultants gain experience and self-awareness through high-quality repetitions and feedback (Mugford). Part of developing this elite work ethic includes taking advantage of opportunities and seeking them out rather than waiting for them to fall into your lap (Harris, Lifrak, Mugford). Taking the initiative to learn, grow, and gain experience in any capacity is an important step toward becoming an effective leader and professional in this field. Additionally, it is essential to point out the importance of the process. Something may not be particularly fun, but if it is a part of the process that will help guide you to becoming the sport psychology consultant you strive to be, it is necessary to embrace as a part of your development (Harris).

In alignment with performing a high standard of work, consultants emphasized the need to master one's current role and responsibilities before climbing to potentially more desired positions. From his position of hiring sport psychology professionals, Dr. Bernie Holliday explained that "It's just a matter of working and really getting your reputation out there as doing stellar work and going to AASP meetings and putting on stellar presentations..." Similarly, Dr. Angus Mugford described that "a lot of people expect to apply and walk right into a dream job scenario...but by getting good at what you're doing, I think the opportunity will present itself as long as you are open, flexible, and keep seeking opportunities and shadowing."

Eagerness to Learn

One way to develop the previously mentioned high standard of work is through the development of a strong and up-to-date knowledge base which informs the applied work we do with athletes, coaches, and organizations. Consultants noted the importance of continuing to learn in a variety of ways, such as journal articles, books, information published by AASP, as well as podcasts (Castillo, Clark, Harris, Lifrak). Dr. Holliday illustrated the importance of this idea through sharing the story of Jigoro Kano, the father of modern-day Judo. Nearing death, Kano informed disciples that he wanted to be buried with a white belt. His disciples were surprised because they wanted to bury him with the honor, dignity, and respect that he had earned with his black belt. Jigoro Kano explained that he came into this world first as a learner before ever being a teacher and that whatever was waiting for him, he wanted to enter it with the same perspective, as a learner first.

Authenticity and Integrity

Being yourself, a real and authentic person, was advice provided by Dr. Bob Harmison. He explained that “You can’t be phony. You have to be genuine otherwise athletes will kind of see right through you.” Dr. Mugford echoed this idea by saying that since consulting is relationally-based, trust is developed through “transparency and articulating [your] intent and behaviorally being able to demonstrate [your] integrity... saying and doing what you say you will.” He shared that he works from the idea that trust is developed through character and competence. If a consultant has one but not the other, it is a problem. Dr. Harmison summarized this well when he said, “Just be who you are. Be genuine and truly care about people and I think that’s the best approach that I would advise people to take.”

Flexibility and Patience

The consultants emphasized that, whether working with an individual, a team, or an organization, there will be situations that require patience and flexibility. Ceci Clark has experienced working with people who may not want to do activities or explore topics with which young practitioners are most familiar and comfortable. Ceci explained that, “you have to

be able to (at least for a period of time) consider what's the initial way to reach that athlete." Having a strong foundation of the different content areas and theories of sport psychology allows you to be flexible and adapt to the needs of the clients. It is vital to have this fundamental understanding because "every athlete is different, and the same intervention will never work twice" (Castillo).

Meanwhile, relationships take time to build, as does trust. Thus, while rapid changes and buy-in may be preferred by practitioners, patience is often required to truly attain them. Ceci had to be patient in wanting to implement a solution faster than the client was ready, reminding herself that cultural change is like a cruise ship making a U-turn, not like a speedboat. She stated that this can be frustrating because "while you feel like the change is really slow, someone who's been part of that culture for a long time actually feels like change is happening and that's scary for them too, and so I think just an appreciation for that [is important]."

Perspectives

Athlete-First Mentality

Ceci's comments on flexibility as a way to reach the client are also based on an athlete-first approach. She stated, "I think we need to make sure that it's not our personality competing against the athletes. I think the athlete needs to know they come first." Similarly, Josh Lifrak emphasized the importance of the athlete as a person when he said, "the biggest failure I see with people who learn sport psychology and are getting into the field, is they think that the sport psychology is the end-all-be-all answer. It's not, it's part of the puzzle." Likewise, Dr. Harmison shared that he believes "athletes have the solutions to whatever it is they are struggling with." He described his work as walking alongside his athletes to help them better understand what they are dealing with. In working with the athlete first, he can then help them uncover a solution that was probably there all along, one they just were not able to find it.

You Do Not Have to be Broken to Get Better

An open-door policy from Dr. Bernie Holliday's first days set in motion a culture that was focused on improving and developing as athletes rather than suggesting that there is a problem that needs to be fixed. He shared a story about a time when he was speaking with a well-known athlete on his team who started discussing some of his struggles. Dr. Holliday said he was not sure whether he should close the door because individuals were continuously interrupting their conversation to introduce themselves to him, yet the athlete never made any indication that he was uncomfortable. Later, Dr. Holliday realized the impact this open-door could have on the culture. He stated, "you heard of the phrase, you don't have to be broken to get better, you don't have to be broken to get stronger and that was sort of the feeling I had in that first moment there." He explained, "I was trying to have an open-door policy from that point on because I realized just how much it became a part of development rather than problems". It was in these first moments in his new role with the team that he felt that the culture supported the idea that you do not have to be broken to get better or stronger.

The Importance of Peers and Colleagues

Multiple practitioners discussed the importance of establishing a strong network of peers and colleagues (Aoyagi, Gordin, Hammermeister). By having a sound network of knowledgeable professionals, consultants are able to draw their interventions from an expansive pool of knowledge in order to complement their own expertise (Aoyagi, Oiness). An outside perspective from a peer or supervisor can help ensure the best possible service for the client. Though it may be exciting for new practitioners to connect with the top minds in the field of sport psychology to learn from their experiences working with elite performers, it is also beneficial to connect with other beginning practitioners in order to exchange informational and emotional support. By establishing long-term relationships with one another, young practitioners are able to give and receive feedback with one another, thus accelerating the development of their professional skillset and making friends along the way. Dr. Rich Gordin highlighted the importance of this idea, as he advised, "...make sure that you establish a peer

group of colleagues that you can rely on to give you honest and authentic feedback when you need it. For instance, if you have a question about something in your applied work, you can feel free to call one of your colleagues and bounce it off of him or her and get some feedback. It is very difficult to practice alone and not have any feedback from others who are doing work similar to what you are doing."

Furthermore, consultants also recommended to seek out multiple supervisors who are established professionals in order to experience multiple consulting and supervision styles (Blom, Gordin). Supervisors may specialize in working with certain groups (e.g., youth, professional sports, military), delivering certain mental skills (e.g., mindfulness, imagery, cognitive-behavioral interventions), and working within specific performance settings (e.g., performing arts, corporations, sport). By receiving supervision from multiple professionals, young practitioners can broaden their horizons. As Dr. Kacey Oiness stated, "I believe there is great value in multiple disciplines working together in order to capitalize/benefit from everyone's expertise."

One way to build a solid network of peers and potential supervisors, is to attend conferences, such as the [AASP Annual Conference](#) (Gordin, Hammermeister). At conferences, the professionals recommend reaching out and getting to know both students and established practitioners. As Dr. Gordin suggested, "...attend professional conferences as early as possible, and network with professionals in the field. Go to sessions, learn new things, ask questions, and meet people." Another reason to network with peers is to increase awareness of jobs and opportunities available in the field (Hammermeister, Holliday). Some job openings are never posted because institutions/organizations want to hire someone they are familiar with. Networking gives young professionals a chance to be considered for jobs for which they might not have otherwise been considered, or, perhaps, for which they were not even aware.

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