

Developing a leadership culture in the consultancy industry

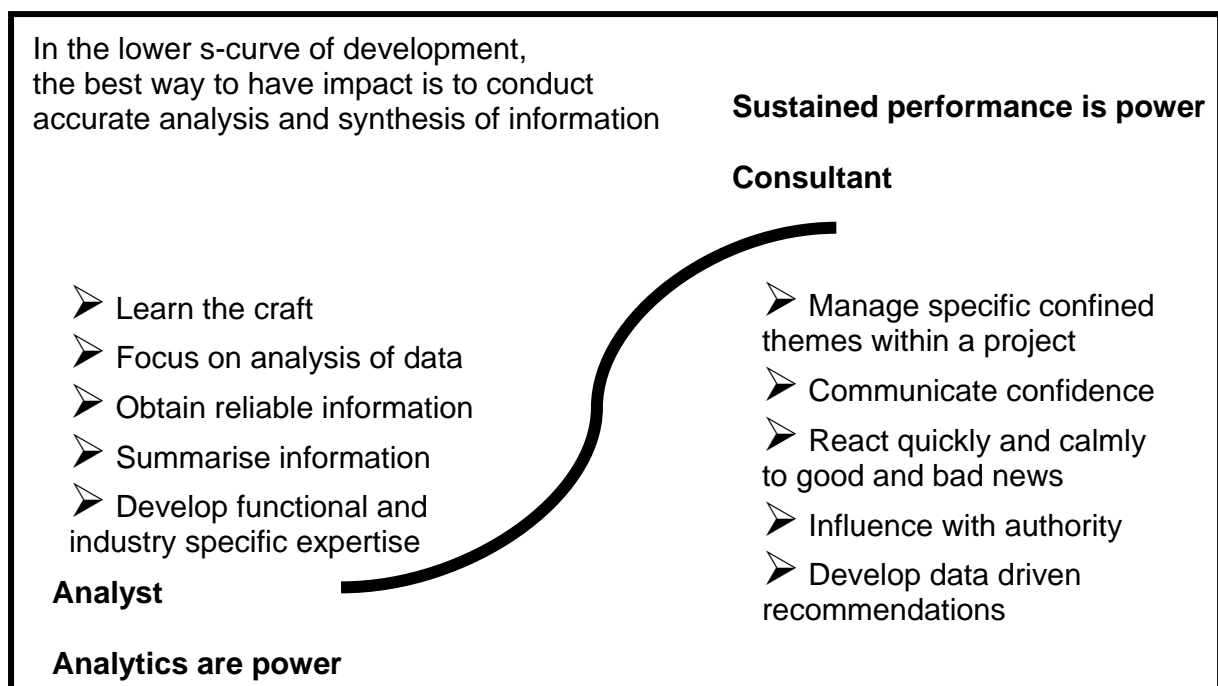
Dr. Sabine Dembkowski & Fiona Eldridge

Global forces of political and technological change are impacting on all industry sectors. For management consultancies this means changing at an even faster rate to stay one step ahead and provide the necessary strategic, planning and implementation support to clients. Firms in the industry are now challenged to develop critical leadership skills to ensure their profitability and competitiveness. These developments are not only necessary to win new business, they are also essential to compete for, and retain, the leading talent to deliver to clients. Central to effective leadership development is the need for consultancy firms to understand the evolutionary curve of leadership through the classical career path in the industry.

In this article we display the classical consultant career path, highlight the critical skills and competencies at each career stage and provide insights into effective leadership development. The career path is made transparent in the form of an easy to recall visualisation of a double s-curve.

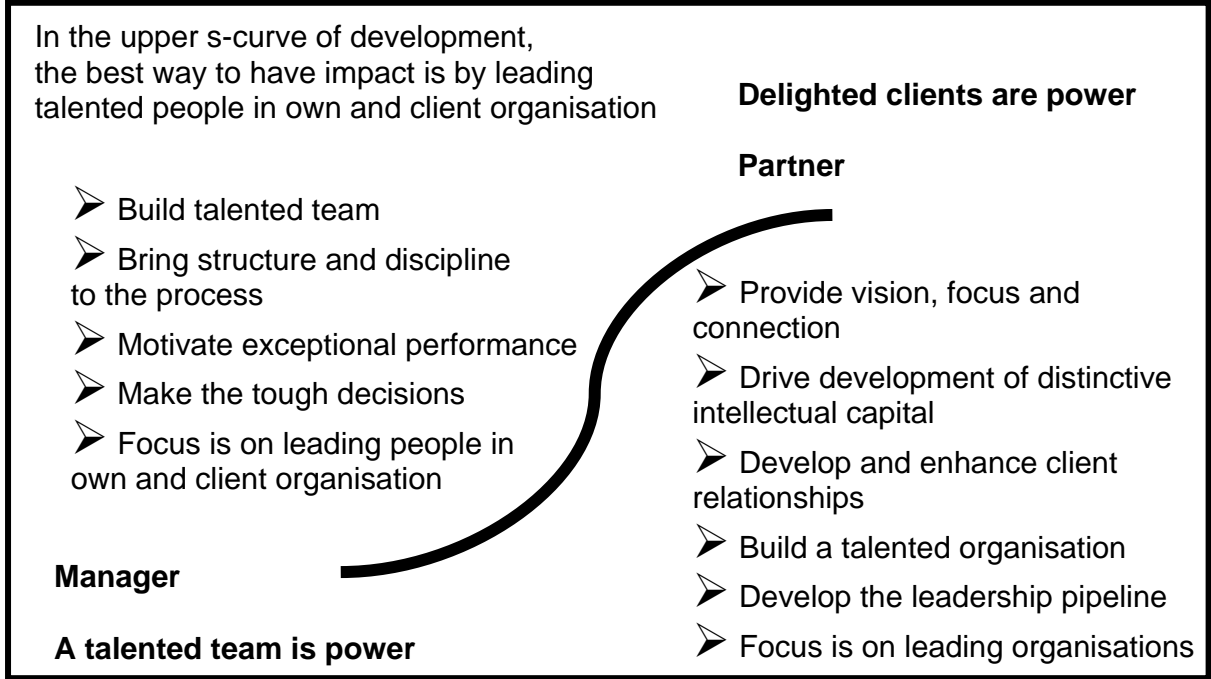
When we examine a “typical” career path in the consultancy industry from Analyst to Partner it becomes evident that there are significant major transitions on the way. For successful firms in the industry who would like to strengthen their competitive position it is crucial to manage these transitions carefully and provide appropriate and effective support in the form of specially tailored training and coaching.

At the beginning of a career within consultancy it is most critical to learn the basic consultancy craft, demonstrate strong analytical capabilities and start to make accurate data driven recommendations. People who master this phase of their career have typically high analytical capabilities and are numerically strong. They will initially progress well. However, it is all too easy to get “trapped” in the analytics and “fall in love” with the numerical and analytical challenges.



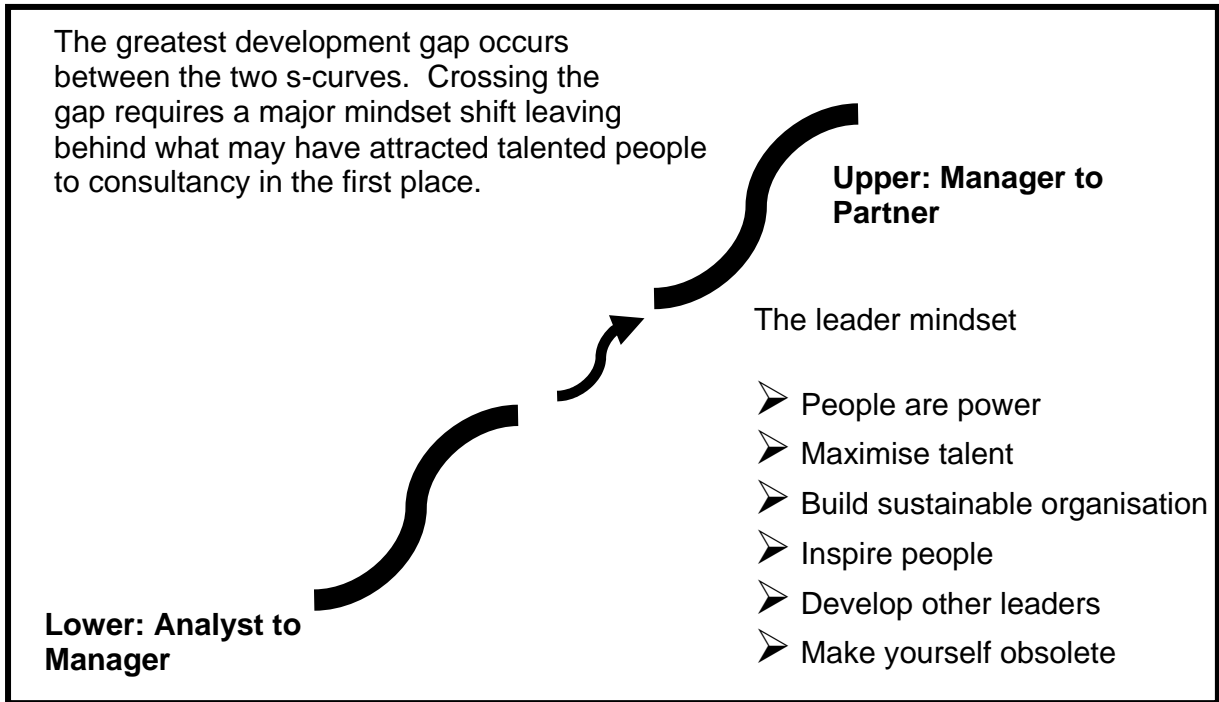
In order to gain advancement to the next level it becomes important to make recommendations and answer the critical “So what?” question. A different skill set needs to come to the fore. On this level communication skills and an empathetic customer orientation become important and determine “success.”

To master these challenges, consultants will have to remember what they learned in the first stage in their career but let go of the details. They will need to be able to delegate as time constraints will not allow them to conduct all the in-depth analysis themselves and, in addition and the same time, they will need to master the development of client recommendations and customer contacts. This requires a different perspective. The ability to develop the bigger picture becomes a real challenge.



In the midst of the career path there is yet another even more challenging transition. In order to be effective as a managing consultant those that want to progress their career have to master the attraction, development and inspiration of a talented team that adds value to the client base.

For those who previously built their career on technical skills and quantitative analysis the shift to an emphasis on people, both inside and outside of their organisation, can be a major hurdle. The emphasis on soft skills becomes even more marked at Partner level. The stars in the industry combine vision with delighting clients and other stakeholders of their firm. Those in the industry know that even the best known firms have only a small number of people who are able to combine all the assets.



The figure illustrates the difficult leap emerging leaders must make as they are challenged to manage a successful transition in the middle of their consultancy career.

Rising to a leadership position in the industry means leaving behind what may once have attracted an individual to the industry in the first place. However, in recent years developments have demonstrated that it is most crucial for successful firms to have leaders who rise up to the challenge.

Leading firms will invest in developing leadership capabilities. In fact, in the current environment of lost trust, heightened scrutiny, increased competition, and less tolerance for wrongdoing consultancy firms may no longer have a free choice but will be forced to take proactive steps towards developing critical leadership capabilities.

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