

Some Pitfalls of Advising Senior Executives

1 **Engaging with the wrong client.**

The wrong client is usually someone who doesn't own the problem, isn't interested in changing, cannot say "yes" to a proposal, has no power to implement, has only an academic interest in the problem, and so on.

2 **Working on the wrong problem.**

Working on a problem that's not really central to the client's agenda or which is not the real problem to begin with.

3 **Being the wrong advisor.**

You may not be the right person to lead the relationship, and you may not be the right firm to take on this particular problem. Telling a client, "I'm not the best person to work on this issue—let me recommend several resources for you," is a powerful way of building trust.

4 **Vicariously exercising power or expertise.**

Consultants sometimes invoke the name and authority of their client to obtain respect and support in the organization. At other times the client executive himself may use the expertise and opinion of the consultant to shore up his own position. Both are dangerous strategies.

5 **Giving too much bad news.**

Clients want objectivity and honesty, but you have to choose your battles carefully—you can't take on your client over every issue, else you risk winning the battle but losing the war.

6 **Sticking with bad clients.**

Sometimes there are differences of personality and style that make a good relationship nearly impossible. Occasionally, your ethics and mores may diverge sharply from those of your client. You don't have to stay in a relationship that's dysfunctional, uncomfortable, or just plain bad.

7 **Believing everything your clients tell you.**

It's a good idea to approach clients' claims about their business success and excuses about their missteps with a healthy dose of skepticism.

8 **Losing the support of the broader organization.**

No matter how strong your relationships may be at the most senior levels, you usually cannot survive for the long term if you lose the support of the broader organization.

9 **Ignoring seemingly "junior" clients.**

Just as it's a mistake to ignore the economic buyer, it's wrong to ignore seemingly less-important executives who in fact may play a far more important role than you think in hiring consultants and/or implementing your recommendations.

10 **Pushing your own agenda.**

You should walk in your client's office with only one agenda—his or hers. If you don't, they'll notice and be wary, either consciously or sub-consciously, of anything you say.