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Developing your Business Partners

The guide to building consulting skills in your team.

hello@totem-consulting.com
0345 548 6836

3rd Floor 86-90 Paul Street
Shoreditch
London EC2A 4NE

Introduction

Are your Business Partners being Business Partners?

Or are they lacking consulting skills and strategic conversations?

You might think after the many years of the Business Partner (BP) job title being banded around, that professionals in those roles would all be settled and confident with the behaviours required. Yet we're finding quite the opposite, as more and more businesses come to us for support to develop their people.

Companies of all shapes and sizes recognise the need for support functions like HR, Learning, Finance and IT to be having more strategic conversations with the business. And over the past 15 years we have seen trends in what holds people back in taking the steps from transactional working to better business partnering. Here are some common challenges:

"I'm not sure I know what is expected of me or how to do it.

What does being a good Business Partner really mean?"

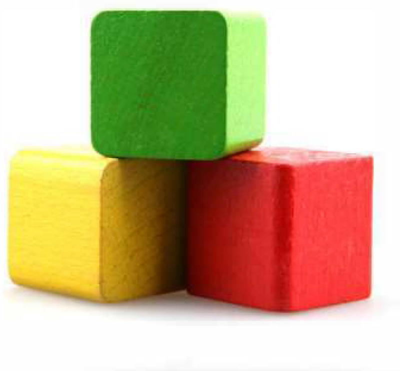
"I'm being asked to say no to the business, when I used to say yes. Saying no sounds rude and a lot of these people are more senior than me. How am I supposed to do that?"

"I keep being told I need to have more strategic conversations, but I'm not really sure what that means. And how would I start doing that when I usually just respond to requests?"

The need for clarity about what good Business Partnering means has led us to create a framework: an outline of the skills and behaviours required. You could see this as the beginning of a competency framework for your BPs.

These are behaviours we have seen consistently in those Partners who are respected, earn a seat at the table and facilitate strategic plans with the business, achieving top and bottom-line outcomes.

We have built this framework from a range of research sources and our practical experience, of both being business partners and delivering BP development across industries for the past 15 years.



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The Framework

The three foundational pieces at the foot of the framework, are about knowing your stuff and communicating that with both confidence and alignment with business direction. These are the basic starting points, that many BPs already have.

Then the four behaviours across the top are the ways in which BPs earn the right to have effective strategic partnerships.

Business Savvy

Understanding & speaking your client's language

Trusted Relationship

Building a strong connection with clients

Influencing & Advising

Being a 'Challenger Consultant'

Planning & Contracting

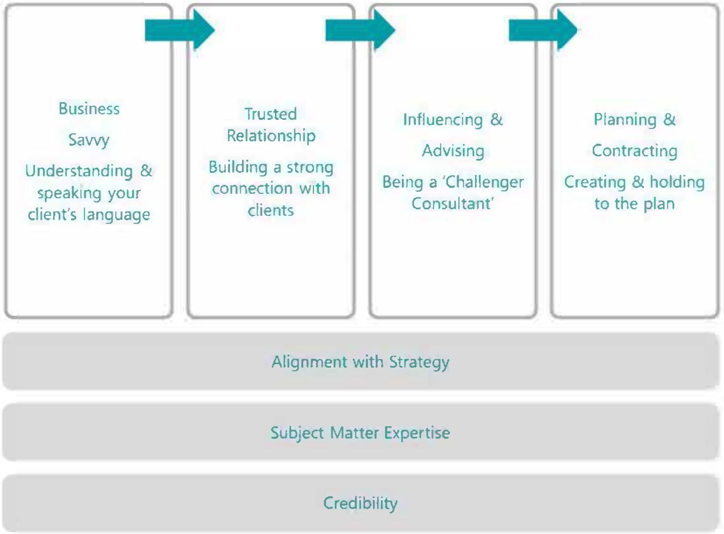
Creating & holding to the plan

Alignment with Strategy

Subject Matter Expertise

Credibility

The Framework



You may spot themes here from Dixon & Adamson's Challenger Sale and Maister et al's Trusted Advisor, as these are critical starting points to understanding the ways successful people build relationships and influence others.

And if the word "sale" has got you feeling a little uncomfortable already, then let's clarify that this is what we do as Business Partners. We are selling ideas, better ways of working, involvement in projects. We are persuading business leaders to do things in better ways.

The Challenger Sale research revealed that there are better ways to sell than the old-school approaches, and the authors hinted at the relevance of this to internal influencing as well.

We have seen this play out time and time again, with the best Business Partners demonstrating those same Challenger behaviours, as the best salespeople.

How can you develop these skills in your team?

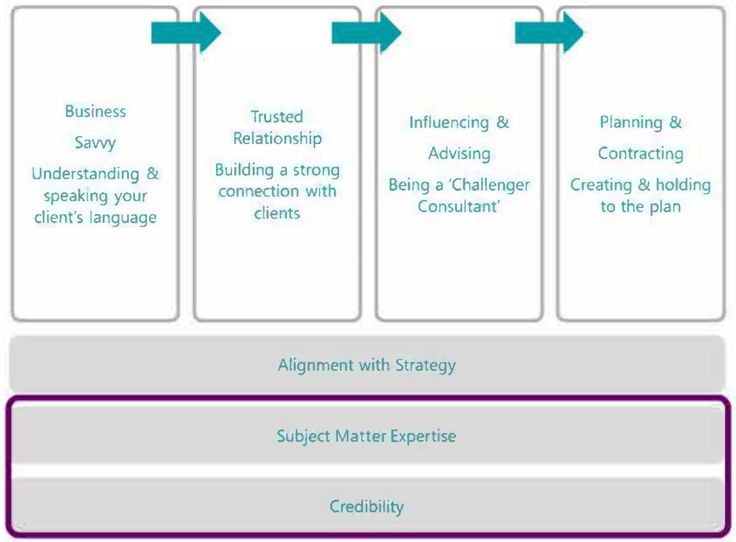
Clarity is the first critical step. What does each of these behaviours mean in your business and in your role?

We have purposefully not provided clients with a complete list of behavioural indicators under each of the headings, because we have found every time that it is the process of Business Partners defining these for themselves, that has the greatest impact.

That said, it is usually helpful to provide a bit more information on each part of the framework, before asking delegates to list out behavioural indicators.

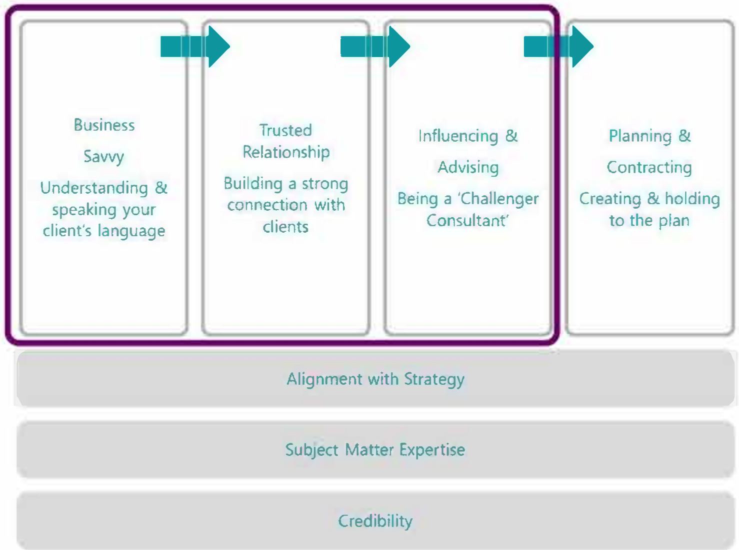
Define the Behaviours

If you were facilitating a workshop on this, you might start by sharing what you would like from a great partner: a trusted advisor you can call on and work closely with, to solve problems and plan for future success. As you share this from your perspective, you can hit on the key points of:



Credibility. Subject Matter Expertise.

As a basic requirement, I'll need an expert in their field who has credibility. That means to me that they are upfront about what they do know and what they don't know, building trust.



Business Savvy. Trusted Relationship.

Someone who understands my world, speaks my language and clearly gets what my goals are. I want to work with someone who feels like a partner, like they're interested in me and my goals and want to support me. I can rely on them.

Influencing & Advising.

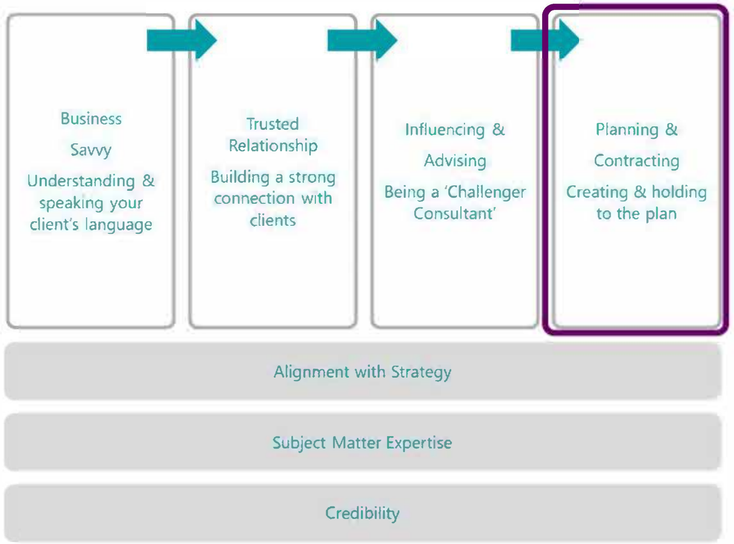
I need to be challenged. I don't just want to work with "yes people," who agree with what I think. I want someone who will share their ideas, add insights I haven't thought of, and show me where there are risks and opportunities I haven't spotted.

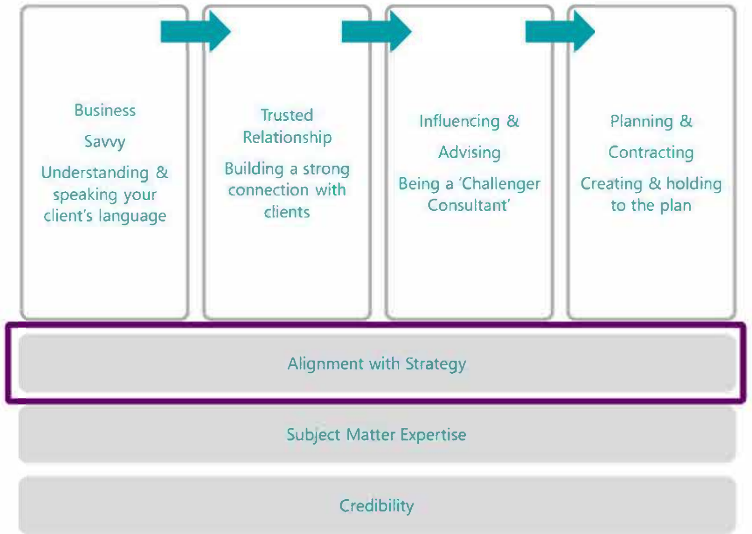
Define the Behaviours

Planning & Contracting.

Finally we'll need a plan, and it would help me if I had someone holding me accountable. Checking in that I've done what I said I would. And maybe even re-contracting with me as things change.

You might describe a supplier you work with, or a partner in another department, exploring which of these things they do well and where there are gaps. Or tell a story about how you have partnered with the business, and used these behaviours to help you earn a seat at the table and influence your clients.





Alignment with Strategy

In your team, you will want to see that there is not only all of the above, but also some agreement and consistency about your direction. We can't have HR Business Partners running around creating different plans with every department, with no alignment to a core People Strategy. The challenge is to have the People Strategy in mind, whilst helping clients in the business achieve their specific goals.

Now ask the team to define these behaviours. Could you split the team into groups, so each group is now making a list of behavioural indicators for each box?

This process may take you a couple of hours, or much longer. It is up to you how much debate and time you put into creating that initial list of behaviours. What if the workshop was just the starting point? After that, you could have 1:1s with each person, to clarify in more detail what this means in their role.

Identify Strengths and Gaps

Now there is far greater clarity on what is expected, you have a goal. Each person has a list of behaviours they need to work towards demonstrating. And so now would be a good time to explore each individual's starting point: where are they now?

"Looking at the list of behaviours we created, what are your relative strengths? And relative development areas?"

You are building a personal development plan with each individual. And as you build a picture of your team strengths and gaps, that can help you plan out a support programme.

Build the Skills

Have you got one BP who has a strength that someone else lacks? What if you buddied up people who could help each other?

Where needed, you can put on workshops to build skills. Whilst many of our clients ask us to do this piece for them, if you have the skills and capacity in-house, you can build out a programme of workshops and on-the-job learning to develop these behaviours. Ask those BPs who have strengths in particular areas, to run workshops or mentoring sessions for the rest of the team.

In terms of structuring the workshops, we have found it is useful to run one session per box / behaviour. Allow 2-3 hours per session, so that there is enough time for discussion, practical activities and input from someone who is skilled in this area. It is incredibly helpful to use stories of how things were done before in a more transactional way, and how things could be done now that demonstrate the behaviour.

Focus on the reasons why this new behaviour is better for the individual and for the business. One of our retail clients asked us to run their Influencing & Advising session. The BPs had got stuck in order-taking mode and most of them felt uncomfortable saying no, or what they thought was saying no.

As we explored different sentence structures and approaches to their example conversations, the team realised that they were not saying no at all. What they were doing was advising their client on how to get a better outcome. And that made them see how they were adding value.

Follow Up

Build this into your 1:1s process

As with all learning and change, we can't expect overnight results. Once you have defined the behaviours and run some workshops or skills development, you'll need to keep attention on the change you want to see.

Review progress regularly in 1:1s, looking at where change has occurred, and recognising shifts in BP behaviour. In team meetings, constantly refer back to the behaviours you want, recognising progress and highlighting where further change is needed.

You'll know the phrase, **"what gets measured gets done,"** so put performance measures in place for the behaviours you want.

And if you're not sure how to measure them, simply talk about them all the time. Because what gets talked about gets noticed too.

How can we help?

If you're starting out on this process, we can help with the facilitation of that first conversation, defining the behaviours you're looking for. And if you're further along, we can support you in designing, delivering and/or training you to deliver the workshop content.

We love talking to people about this, so drop us a line! hello@totem-consulting.com

About Us

We're a team of business psychologists, specialising in the assessment and development of people to be at their best. If you're working on culture, change, succession, engagement, recruitment, retention, management, leadership or professional learning and development, we're here to help.

The best people to tell you about how we work are our clients, and they consistently comment on our flexibility, deep expertise across the employee lifecycle and the way we embed ourselves into their culture. Success for us is when we feel like part of your team and deliver work that feels like it was designed by your business, for your business.

Assessment

It's our understanding of objective assessment best practice, paired with a super pragmatic approach that helps us create relevant, easy-to-use competency frameworks, assessment materials and interview guides. If you want a more objective and effective assessment process, or to build your capability to run these projects in-house let's talk.

Development

Once you've hired the best talent, you'll want to develop them and build managers and leaders to inspire and deliver outstanding results. Our objective with all learning is behavioural change, so whether we're designing a 90-minute workshop, or running an 18-month programme, you will have something bespoke that delivers results.

Steve Weller
Chief Executive Officer, Uswitch

Totem took the time to really understand our culture, flex to our needs and continuously improve the programme - reflecting our own agile principles. I highly recommend working with them.

Mark Cahill
Managing Director, Manpower Group

Totem have been a great asset to the team, building relationships with senior stakeholders, holding credibility when they challenge and helping them embed the coaching behaviour we're looking for.

Cristi Lockett,
Senior Director KFC Global

I greatly value the way Totem work, how they tailor everything they do to us, their openness and flexibility and the fact that we can have fun at the same time!

A few more of our great friends...