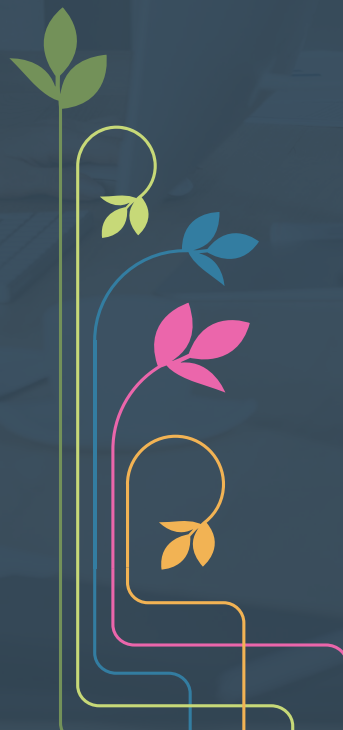




**PIERCE
WASHINGTON**

ALIGNING WITH YOUR CUSTOMER'S VISION FOR SUCCESS

John Carey—Pierce Washington Founder





In this Voice of Leadership, Pierce Washington founder John Carey shares why customer alignment is the essence of good consulting and outlines five key steps you can take to internalize your customer's vision for success.

When you think of the most important aspects of effective consulting, what comes to mind?

For most consultants, technical knowledge and implementation ranks at the top of that list. But just as important as the technical component is developing and fostering a relationship with your clients.

Customer alignment can not only help ensure a successful project, but it will also set you up for long-term success and even lifelong clients.

“Customer alignment is really the heart of a successful project. The ability to internalize a customer's vision for success is the essence of good consulting.”

– John Carey, Founder and CEO, Pierce Washington



HOW A FOCUS ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS STARTED A COMPANY

Pierce Washington founder John Carey has 30 years of consulting experience, working for large firms before eventually building an entire consulting firm from the ground up.

It was John's own ability to align with a customer's vision that led to the formation of Pierce Washington. While working as a consultant at the beginning of his career, he prioritized developing good relationships with his contacts.



By working closely with his customers and aligning to their own visions of success, he was able to deliver projects that were consistently well-received. Eventually, this led to the beginning of Pierce Washington.

Here are five critical things John recommends consultants do to align with their customers and create successful partnerships:

FIND OUT WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO YOUR CUSTOMER.

The beginning of your project will likely consist of multiple client meetings to learn more about the company, their pain points, and the ultimate outcome they would like to see. As you spend this time getting to know the problem, it's important to set aside your assumptions and internalize what it is the customer has in mind.

"The success of a project is more than just what you're providing to the company," John explains. "There's a human element to it as well. For the person leading the project, this is going to impact their career. Understanding what their vision is and understanding what success looks like for them—and then getting your entire team on board with that vision—is the essence of good consulting."

What's the best way to approach this? Start by developing a personal relationship with your clients. "Don't forget about the person sitting across the table," says John. "Developing a personal relationship with clients elevates it from a vendor relationship to a partner relationship."



Once you know what success looks like, focus on making your client successful within their own organization. In focusing on their success, you'll begin to develop a true partnership and ultimately set your own business up for greater opportunities.

DEFINE AND ESTABLISH QUICK WINS.

One way to set your client up for success is to achieve quick wins early in the project. Oftentimes, projects can span a year or more. A consulting relationship can become strained when a client wants to take on too much at once or expand the scope to the point that it becomes virtually impossible given the resources at hand.

"During a long engagement, it's easy for people within the organization to get project fatigue," John says. "It's better to find something you can deliver meaningful business value on in a short period of time."



This could be taking an 18-month project and dividing it into several different milestones. Breaking the project into manageable milestones and getting “quick wins” allows you to build momentum and establish a pattern for success you can build upon.

This will also help you earn the trust of your clients and showcase your value early in the process. “One way to speed up that trust process is to demonstrate to stakeholders that you’ve been successful in this area in the past,” John says. “Getting your customer to a win provides that assurance by delivering impactful results, and that success builds momentum.”

STAY FLEXIBLE.

One of the most challenging parts of consulting is managing scope. Even though you’ll spend several hours in planning sessions at the beginning of a project, there’s no real way to determine how a year-long project or more will look after just a few hours of discovery. There are many reasons for a project to evolve: clients’ products change, their markets change, their leadership changes, and so forth.

Being flexible by discussing different options that meet expectations while remaining within the client’s budget will help keep the project moving towards the finish line. “The bigger the job, the more unknowns there will be,” John says. “You have to have flexibility. If you have a trusting client relationship that you can rely on, it becomes very powerful.”

This is also where nurturing the client relationship also comes into play. He gives an example of a multi-year project with a trusted, long-term client in the aerospace industry that included one contract a year for multiple divisions. When one division wasn’t ready to begin, John and his team simply swapped it out. “I didn’t know if it was an even swap or not,” he recalls. “We were just working together to make the project a success.”

When you have a consulting arrangement based on a mutual foundation of trust, both you and your client know that the ultimate goal is to make them successful, making flexibility easier for both parties.

REMEMBER TO PROVIDE BEST PRACTICES WITH TOOL KNOWLEDGE.

As experts in your tool, it’s easy to fall into a trap of simply doing what the customer wants or asks. While this isn’t necessarily a negative thing, it’s important that the consultant provide guidance through best practices rather than just taking orders.

“There’s a consultative aspect to it as well,” John says. “If you combine best practices with the tool knowledge, you’re in a position of being able to help them make the best decision based on their needs.”

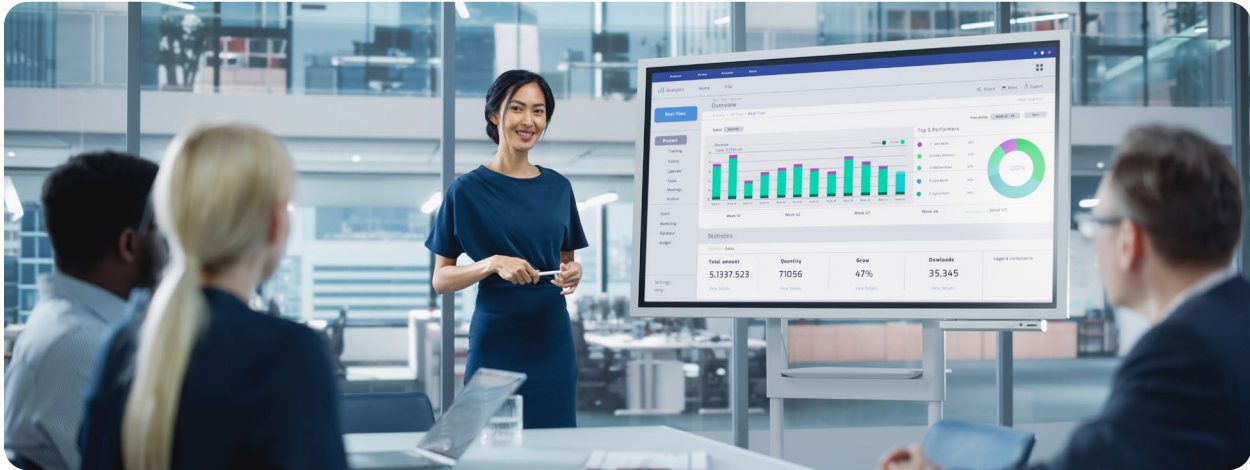


This is where finding your leadership voice and drawing on your own expertise will be useful. For example, if you have a client faced with a problem you have seen before, discuss the different ways you've seen it handled by different companies within their industry, and then discuss the pros and cons of each. Combining your understanding of their overall vision with your experience gives your clients confidence in your expertise and the value you provide.

MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY.

As you work with your clients, it's critical that you maintain transparency throughout the project. In addition to providing visibility into how the project is progressing and any roadblocks that may arise, you should also be upfront about dollars spent.

This is especially true on a big project, as things can shift and scope can change. John sticks with weekly status reports that outline not only project status and how much has been spent, but whether they are on track to complete the remainder of the project's scope within budget. This allows your customers to reprioritize if needed. By providing this information early, it gives customers the ability to make decisions proactively, rather than getting stuck in bad position.



FINAL THOUGHTS—CUSTOMER ALIGNMENT IS THE ESSENCE OF GOOD CONSULTING

A successful consulting career hinges on your ability to deliver lasting value to your client, and the only way to do so is by aligning with their vision.

“Internalizing what is important to your client is the heart of good consulting,” John says. “Being flexible, identifying their vision, and committing to their success elevates the arrangement from a vendor relationship to a true partnership.”

