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One on One with Griffin Strategic Advisors' Carrie Shea

After years of working within some of the profession's largest firms, Carrie Shea thought the time-tested consulting model was becoming outdated. She, and her husband Michael Shea, launched Griffin Strategic Advisors based on what she thought clients wanted but couldn't find from more traditional firms. To learn more, Consulting's One-on-One recently sat down with Shea for a two-part conversation.

In this interview, Shea shares how her firm's model is unique from a client's perspective and discusses how the model is different from her staff's point of view.



Carrie Shea,
CEO,
Griffin Strategic
Advisors

Consulting: What problems did you identify in the traditional consulting firm model?

Shea: I grew up at A.T. Kearney, spending 13 years and made partner. I helped launch Archstone Consulting and then later joined The Cambridge Group. While they are all great firms, I always thought there was a different business model that would make more sense for consulting clients. For one, those firms have a typical leverage model of 7-10 to 1. As a partner, it's difficult to keep one's team fully utilized all the time. And that goal isn't always necessarily in the interest of the client. How much client value is the seventh junior person on a seven-person team really delivering? And among the mid-level consultants, they have tremendous experience, but aren't always able to leverage their knowledge.

Consulting: What's different about your firm's leverage model?

Shea: When I started my firm in August 2008, I wanted to challenge that traditional business model. First, not every engagement needs 10 consultants. Often, smaller, more senior-heavy teams could do a better job. We turned the leverage model on its head by staffing engagements with two to three senior people who are supported by one to two junior people. As a result, our projects are smaller and more economical.

Consulting: What else is different about your consulting teams?

Shea: Our client engagements are staffed with pairs of senior professionals: at least one career consultant and a former senior industry executive. We've found that industry veterans are wonderful resources because they bring real-world pragmatism and a call for action-oriented advice, which has really been a great means of differentiation for us.

Consulting: How do the profit margins compare for this model verses the more traditional model you led earlier in your career?

Shea: Our profit margins are very comparable here to what I was able to achieve at more traditional firms. But from a client perspective, the total cost is less — our senior people are more knowledgeable and therefore spend less client time on data gathering. Our consulting teams are also staffed with our clients' top people, working with us on a half-time or quarter-time basis. They know where the data is inside their company; they know how to access the data; they know the industry. Even when counting the time upfront to train them on our processes and methodology, this model still enables us to more quickly get the basic analytics done.

Consulting: Beyond saving money, what are the other benefits to leading client-staffed teams?

Shea: Because of their involvement, our clients feel far more ownership to the engagement. They own the recommendations. They tell us they were 'consulted with,' not 'consulted to'. We let the client choose who works with us. We ask for those who are strong analytically, or those the client has identified as high potential or top performing. Occasionally we've had to swap out a team member, but that's rare. The up front sharing of our processes and methodologies tends to help people come up to speed very quickly. And after working with us, they tend to become advocates for our kinds of consulting. It's a great developmental experience.

Consulting: When staffing your firm, what's your selection criterion for determining which industry veterans will make good consultants?

Shea: A lot of our top candidates are those that were part of the client team when their business brought in an outside consultant. In many cases, those that seek us out had experience with large consulting processes, like McKinsey or BCG, but thought it could be done better—through the eyes of an industry executive. We're not just looking for functional excellence, but instead favor those with broad management experience. We like people that are willing to roll up their sleeves and work on projects. We've found the best industry talent for consulting firms can be found within international organizations because despite being very senior and having P&L responsibilities, they are still just an influencer—they make recommendations like a consultant would.

Consulting: How do you on-board industry veterans?

Shea: Initially, our industry folks work on a contract basis so we can determine how devoted they are to learning new skills. It does take someone willing to retool him or herself, learn new approaches and methodologies. And they are always partnered with a career consultant. We strive for advice that is both visionary and pragmatic. And clients love it. We've been on the short list against many of the big firms and have been selected. When we ask why we won the engagement, the most common answer is that clients like our model of an industry executive paired with career consultants.

Consulting: For the career consultants, what's unique about your business model?

Shea: We acknowledge that there are junior and senior people who don't want to commit to a full-time, seven-day a week consulting career. So, to supplement our core team, we employ what we call Griffin affiliates who are close to the company but want flexibility. They may be leaving consulting and thinking about going into industry or leaving industry and thinking of retiring, but are not quite ready. We have some employees who only want to work four days a week—they will work really hard those days and are very talented—some are ex-Bain and ex-BCG consultants. They are truly top talent, but want a different balance in their life than they've found elsewhere. We offer great part-time consulting options.

Consulting: When someone is working part-time, chances are they may leave when a full-time position opens up elsewhere. Is that a problem for your model?

Shea: We realize they some may want to leave to go back to industry, and that's okay. One former COO of a large appliance company worked for us for a year, and then become COO of another larger appliance company, and is now a client. We are working hard to build a strong alumni network. The workforce is changing and these trends are only going to get more extenuated in the future. We think this model helps turn those changes from a constraint into an advantage. And so far, so good. We've doubled our revenue every year.