



Quality Management in the Age of Global Governmental Relations. A Discussion Piece

by *Dominik Meier*

Executive Summary

Quality management is a crucial challenge for governmental relations worldwide. Constantly growing political-economic volatility and transnational interconnectedness raise the question of how excellence in political consulting can be assured even in an era of global governmental relations. Answering this question is the key to making a strategic public affairs impact and, thus, guarantee long-term client satisfaction. This discussion piece seeks to initiate an international debate on quality and quality management in public affairs. I pursue a two-step approach. First, I delineate the three pillars of effective and efficient consulting – empowering, condensing, and influencing –, which are detailed in my book “Power and its Logic”. Second and based on these principles, I analyze the five core areas where pro-active quality management is indispensable for successful governmental relations: work processes, network management, ethical and professional standards, training and digitization. Defining and implementing clear-cut and applicable quality criteria for these areas requires both time and resources. However, this is not only an investment in consulting capacity, but also in crisis resilience and sustainable business development.

An international discussion on quality management in political consulting is still lacking. No matter what terminology is ultimately used, whether public affairs, lobbying or governmental relations, we must face the demand for quality and excellence in a new and honest way. In Europe, the Public Community of Europe (PACE) has recently been a starting point for a debate on quality management. At the national level, the discussion in Germany, spearheaded by the German Association of Political Consultants (degepol) seems to be most advanced. However, even these discourses are still in the early stages of development. This dismal state must change.

The dramatically increasing volatility and acceleration of global political developments are causing companies to lose their sense of direction. Coupled with transnational policy integration and exponential technological-digital innovation, these trends represent a new challenge for policy consulting. Consultancies must optimize their processes and services through rigid quality management if they are to meet the demands of global governmental relations. Quality management is not about the old question of whether success or failure of advocacy can be quantified and measured or whether key performance indicators (KPIs) for public affairs can be defined. Both debates are dead ends. Rather, it is about quality criteria for excellence in consulting. It's about the global sustainability of our industry.

Effective and efficient political consulting is based on the methodology of political praxeology. With this methodology – analytically descriptive and ethically neutral – three pillars of practical political consulting can be determined, which have been analyzed in our



much-discussed handbook *Power and its Logic: Mastering Politics* (2019, Columbia University Press/Transcript): empowering – condensing – influencing.

The buzzword of empowerment encompasses the teaching of key competences - political organizational logic, political language, political ethos - through individualized coaching and training. The core objective is to provide the client with an orientation on the political power field and the habitual control of its laws and mechanisms. Condensation refers to the pooling, analytical penetration and finally the prognostic processing of decision-relevant information from the entire political arena. The focus is on the acquisition of political knowledge and the definition of strategic goals. The last element is the proactive, strategy-led participation in shaping the political space through use of the instruments of the public affairs toolbox. This practical implementation of a strategic plan requires tactical know-how as well as routine and adaptability to a changing policy environment.

These three building blocks and the corresponding basic rules of policy advice are universal. They apply to all political systems and to all nations and epochs. However, they must be contextualized considering the cultural and institutional peculiarities and narratives of the place of deployment; this is the great intercultural challenge of global governmental relations. In addition, their implementation and evaluation must satisfy several formal and content-related quality criteria; this is the crucial litmus test for the quality of counselling.

In order to guarantee the quality of political advice in our volatile times, we focus on five topics: work processes, network management, ethical and professional standards, training and digitization.

In a volatile political environment, work processes with and for the client are only successful and efficient if they function flexibly, result-oriented and responsively and can be based on a precise decision-making structure with clearly assigned contact persons and adherence to the four-eyes principle. The direct exchange with clients via continuous calls and meetings integrated into the daily work routine, but also via ad hoc communication in the event of critical events, ensures that consulting strategy and customer preference complement each other. A simple principle applies: every client is different. Tailor-made empowerment, which takes knowledge, goals and customer personalities seriously, is therefore based on an explicit feedback and error culture. Only those who obtain and give feedback internally and externally can improve upon proven approaches and formats. Only those who possess risk awareness, are willing to make mistakes and have the courage to learn from them can sustainably optimize work processes.

Network management determines the identification, addressing and communication of decision-makers at the interface of politics, business and society. The knowledge of the interdependence of relevant groups of actors in the political arena is also decisive in order to be able to adequately assess this balance of power for customer work. The fluidity of networks, which often overlap thematically, personnel-wise, power hierarchically,



organization-related and habitually, poses a great challenge to consulting. Such political networks aim primarily at four dimensions: exchange of information, exercise of power, maintenance of power and policymaking. The knowledge about this, the possibilities of access to it, the possibilities of influencing it, are important elements of political consultation.

A clear professional ethos and binding professional standards are not an end in themselves. Especially in political consulting, value orientation and integrity are the prerequisites for trust. And trust is the guiding currency of democracy. National or even international codes of conduct, thus, have the potential to establish lasting confidence in the willingness of consultancies to abide by self-given moral rules and to contribute to the common good. The guiding principles of such codes - truthfulness, discretion, fairness, incompatibility of office and mandate as well as the pursuit of transparency and others – are universal. They form the foundation of a public welfare-oriented representation of interests that is committed not only to respecting written and unwritten democratic norms, but also to generalizing the goals it represents. Quality in political consulting always also means assuming responsibility for the common good of society when helping to shape the political space.

Education is the key to securing qualitative excellence in consulting in the long term and in a sustainable manner. A comprehensive training curriculum as well as firmly established coaching and mentoring processes, in which junior consultants have low-threshold access to feedback and enter into direct customer contact at an early stage under guidance, are decisive. Consultancies are obliged to support their employees in developing their potential and to guide them in compensating for weaknesses and gaps in knowledge. An equally important factor in this context is of course the internal transfer of knowledge. The capital of a consulting firm is its employees and the decentralized pool of information, analyses, documents, contacts and experience that is scattered across a wide range of mandates and departments. One of the central tasks of quality assurance in the public affairs sector is to raise this pool through efficient digital filing and content management and thereby generate synergies between topics, people and projects.

For the political domain, the digital revolution means a dramatic increase in data and communicators, but also a significant acceleration of news and communication cycles. The immediate exchange of information and the immediate articulation of interest and complaints about social media is a ubiquitous phenomenon. This technological-social paradigm shift confronts consultancies with completely new possibilities and threats that must be addressed by adequate quality management. The opportunities for improved information acquisition and knowledge management using web crawlers, which employ data mining and social media mining to search the Internet, are opposed by corresponding risks in data security and data protection. These requirements can only be met with highly sensitive cloud solutions that meet the latest data security standards. The key to success is professional IT management to provide a powerful, information-rich digital infrastructure and strict adherence to and enforcement of binding data protection standards.

de|ge|pol



Addressing the five task areas - process optimization, network management, ethos and professionalization, education, and digitization - takes time and resources. It costs money. But there is a direct pay-off: if you invest in quality assurance and quality management as a political consultant, you invest in higher consulting effectiveness and efficiency, but also in crisis resilience and sustainable business development. These are prerequisites for excellently implementing the principles of empowerment, consolidation and design in the democracy of the 21st century.

About the author

Dominik Meier is the owner and managing director of Miller & Meier Consulting, Germany's leading owner-controlled consultancy for political strategy and lobbying.

He is the co-founder and chairman of de|ge|pol, the German Association of Political Consultants as well as vice president of PACE, the Public Affairs Community of Europe.

