



## Council and armies: the song of the sirens

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**Armies are making increasing use of external consulting firms. Such recourse would ensure the best possible choices and successful reforms. In fact, the use of in-house resources would often be more appropriate than relying on private organizations.**

"Counselling is an innocent drug to the giver, rarely beneficial to the taker".

Simon de Bignicourt, Pensées et réflexions philosophiques (1755)

Armies are increasingly resorting to consulting firms in order to restructure the organization, improve procedures, include the latest high-performance technologies [1] ... These recourses seem simple and would give the assurance of successful reforms. The reality seems more complex: the use of internal resources would often be more relevant than the solicitation of private organizations.

### **The military specificity, a limit for consulting firms**

In spite of its willingness, a consulting firm approaches the problems of armies as it would approach those of a company or a public body. No one can blame them for this, as each one has its own specific skills.

However, the military profession has many specific features. A solution that is perfectly effective in a civilian context may become ineffective when applied to the military. Take, for example, the recent reorganisation of the armed forces into defence bases. At the

time of this reform, many firms were selling their services in order to mutualize, optimize, regroup, rationalize [2] ... It was fashionable, the possibility of doing better with less grayed minds. Many advisers walked the corridors of the various ministries, including the Ministry of Defence. Their expertise was seen as an opportunity in the pressing context of the RGPP. Thus, the services were grouped together and pooled.

But during the operation in Mali, this reform showed its limits. A specificity of our profession suddenly came back to the forefront: the need to be able to project itself quickly with all the capacities and to support a force in the long term. In order to carry out such a mission, responsiveness was required and an unparalleled diversification at the lowest levels was necessary: not only weapons, but also services that included chaplains and cooks, lawyers and gunsmiths, engineers and transmitters, doctors, mechanics and dog handlers... No other institution, no other company needs to have such a range of capabilities in such a short time. However, this need for an expeditionary force with exhaustive and rapidly projectable functions came up against mutualisation. In the end, the difficulties were overcome by breaking away from the rules and procedures laid down. The reform was made for an administration, for peacetime; it became a hindrance when an operational emergency arose. This was the limit of the cabinet councils: it was not a routine administration.

But there was no need to blame the councillors. They did their job. When it comes to reform and reorganization in the armed forces, only the military remains the expert of last resort and not the advisor specializing in reorganization. No one can therefore accuse the report of a consulting firm to clear themselves.

The song of the sirens has always led ships over reefs, and good captains know that it is better to tie yourself to the mast to stay upright in your boots than to give in to this melody. But the siren song of the consulting firms often works. How do they do it?

## **The siren song of the consulting firms**

The first reason is the poverty of our humanity. The solicitation of a consulting firm and the relationships that follow are not insignificant for the military. The officer may find some satisfaction in establishing a privileged relationship with advisers in the private world. This advisory world is selective, demanding and socially rewarding. Being around the best, enjoying it, talking about it around you is already the beginning of a loss of perspective.

What's more, outside advice brings new and exciting ideas. After years of military experience during which everyone is confronted with the same burdens of the institution, the modern and rapid ideas of advisors sometimes give the feeling of a breath of fresh air in a bureaucratic world that one would like to see evolve. Illusion! Gravity exists everywhere in different forms, and the breath of oxygen can also contain a dose of toxic gas of ideas unsuitable for our profession, as we have seen previously.

## **Business logic and service**

We must not lose sight of the fact that firms are trained to conquer and court. This ability to market is at the heart of their business. It enables them to win tenders, an essential condition for maintaining or increasing turnover. Without making any value judgements,

this commercial component, with all its codes, jargon and tricks, does not belong at all to the military's field of expertise. More accustomed to hierarchical and direct relations, and a novice in the commercial field, the officer may find it difficult to decipher offers and their real foundations. What are the major pitfalls?

The commercial logic leads some consulting firms to give themselves an additional mission in the conclusions of their report. The aim is to create a "domino effect", with each assignment leading to the next. For example, a firm that specializes in reorganization and deployment of IT solutions will skillfully suggest, in the conclusions of a reorganization assignment, to modify the IT system according to a deployment that perfectly matches its particular skills. Accustomed to working with the service provider, the client will reappoint the firm for the mission that the firm has shaped itself.

Using a consulting firm sometimes consists in being offered ready-made solutions that will not give full satisfaction. Indeed, firms are inventors of concepts. When they are confronted with a new difficulty in an institution or a company, they will look for an adapted solution and will undoubtedly lose some money on this first confrontation. Once the solution model has been found and tested, they will reproduce this solution to the satisfaction of a large number of clients. To make maximum profit, this solution will be modified at the margin to adjust to the customer. In the end, it is more the customer who will have to adapt to the solution and not the other way around.

These concepts are often accompanied by a fashion logic that can be pernicious. It is the logic of "You can't not...", "You can't not do sustainable development, mutualisation, digitalisation...". The officer can be sensitive to this argument by wanting to "dust off the institution" or benefit from the best innovations. But it is often a new siren singing... For example, today, the fashionable concept is the digitalisation of companies. However, these innovative solutions are not very mature, sometimes not very effective and there is little hindsight in this area. Offers are flourishing, each as different as the next. The concept of digital is poorly defined and covers everything and its opposite. Caution is therefore called for.

But let's not caricature: the majority of consulting firms are based on a provider-client relationship and their objective remains client satisfaction. Unfortunately, the search for this satisfaction also involves risks. A firm may limit itself to putting its clients' ideas in writing without really adding value. This is particularly true if a client has a preconceived idea that is important to him. The consulting firm will not fight beyond a certain limit to maintain good relations from a business perspective. Worse, consulting firms are often confronted with managers who do not want to take responsibility for imposing a difficult reform. They then use a consulting firm to clear themselves. The leader, backed by a report from specialists, then gives the impression of transferring orders that he is not the cause of. If the implementation fails, he can then accuse the advisers in front of his chiefs and subordinates. In this case, recourse to the council becomes pernicious.

There is another major difficulty in a call for tenders. The institution must draw up a set of specifications, neither too precise nor too broad in its mandate. In one case, the narrowness of the subject matter would not make it possible to get the most out of the advisers and, in the other, there would be a risk of dispersion leading to a never-ending mission. Longer missions are most often the result of a poor initial mandate. However, the cost of advisers remains particularly high. On average, the presence of a partner will be invoiced 1,000 euros per day, that of a young junior at least 400 euros. When the team is large, extending the duration of the mission quickly poses a financial problem. Conversely, using in-house officers costs nothing!

## **External or internal advice?**

In spite of appearances, the use of external advice remains a complicated and expensive option.

Currently, most companies set up internal consulting units to avoid all the pitfalls described above. In-house consultants are much cheaper and they are familiar with the specifics of the company. External advice is only sought for specific problems from firms that are experts in the field. In this case, internal advisors accompany the external advisors throughout the duration of the assignment.

The same movement took place a few years ago with the development of internal auditing<sup>3]</sup>. Following this movement, the armies also set up their own auditing force through the creation of the Army Audit Centre.

As far as consulting is concerned, the armies consider that the inspection bodies are in charge of it (army inspection, army inspection...). In reality, however, it is difficult to be on the front line of both consultancy and inspection at the same time. Moreover, these bodies do not interface with external consulting firms.

So, why not create the army's internal consulting firm?

Finally, "The advice of a true friend is more effective than all the opinions of the most enlightened men" <sup>4]</sup>.

<sup>1]</sup> Almost non-existent in the early 2000s, public sector consulting now represents 10% of the consulting market in France.

### **2] "Consulting firms take on the State" - Le Figaro, November 2007**

<sup>3]</sup> One pitfall consists in confusing advice and audit. An audit is the verification of compliance with procedures, rules, accounts, etc. in relation to a given frame of reference, or also the drawing up of an inventory of fixtures in the face of a given problem. In military parlance, it is the answer to Foch's question: "what is it all about". It is also part 1 of the MEDO where everything is analysed. This analysis results in recommendations which are as many imperatives, constraints, guidelines... All these conclusions, and this is the strength of the audit, are all demonstrable. This is what is called the "audit trail", the ability to go from the evidence in the field to the recommendation in a scientific manner. It is therefore rigorous work that does not suffer from creativity, but which can be solidly based on it. Conversely, the advice would be more like Part 2 of the MEDO. It is the creation and the choice of mode of action. It involves more experience than science and a great deal of creativity. And this is where understanding the specificity of the client's activity is essential.

<sup>4]</sup> Francis Bacon, "Essays"(1625 )

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