



# TOP 10 BEHAVIORAL CONSULTING TIPS

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1. **Make suggestions related to some practice the consultee already demonstrates whenever possible.** This can be a practice the teacher uses with another student or in another class or with this student at other times.
  - **Key concept:** Change is more likely to be embraced if the consultee believes s/he already does something you want them to do only slightly differently now.
  - **Example:** “Jane, I noticed that the students were all highly engaged when you did that delightful lesson on “short a” sound yesterday. I wonder if some of the ways you got George and Billy (*students with no disabilities who required infrequent minor redirection*) so involved might be effective for John. (*Student with disability requiring frequent minor redirection*) Do you remember the skillful way you cued them? (*You have now given a reinforcer to this consultee—praise.*) You smiled at George and Billy, tapped the desk and looked expectant. Let’s talk a little bit about your thoughts on using this technique with John.”
2. **Know the law and be ready to empathetically show how this suggestion is consistent with legal requirements.** Use a “confidante” demeanor, not an IEP police, judge, compliance documenting demeanor.
  - **Key concept:** When resistance to change is discovered, it is important for the consultant to convey his/her understanding of the consultee’s position, yet in a friendly way convey absolute legal requirements.
  - **Example:** “I feel remorse in not having told you about the “Doe vs. Withers” case at the end of our last meeting, Michael. The teacher in that case didn’t want to do accommodations either. After all, they can be time consuming when you have a large class to deal with. In that case, the principal and superintendent reminded the teacher of the repercussions of failure to implement IEP team derived interventions, but the teacher refused. He ended up paying a \$15,000 fine out of his own pocket. I should have mentioned that to you, Michael. I wouldn’t want you to decline to implement the accommodations we came up with without you knowing about that case! Remember, we can always hold a new IEP meeting to develop different accommodations if these aren’t effective or if you have alternative ideas. Or perhaps I can offer some further assistance to you in how to overcome any barriers you have found in allowing Peter to take oral tests?”

**3. Involve the student whenever possible in planning, truly valuing and acting upon his/her input**

- **Key Concept:** When all stakeholders have had a say, commitment to change is enhanced.
- **Example:** “Billy, we are all meeting here today to talk about how to help you learn better in school and we will all be talking about what might help you get better grades, complete more work and stay on task better. We want you to give us your ideas as we talk about ideas we have to help you. Everyone should give their opinions about what might work, and what might not work. First, let’s talk about why it is hard to concentrate in school and follow through with your seatwork. These are the barriers we want to help find ways to overcome so you can be a top student. We feel you are a really smart person and we want to be the best teachers we can be for you! Can you help us figure out how to best do that?”

**4. Make the change seem like the consultee thought of it**

- **Key Concept:** If the consultee thinks of a solution to a problem, even one that requires a lot of shaping to be viable, follow-through is more likely.
- **Example:** “I wonder what we can think of to help us solve this problem, Melissa. Let’s think about it together for a moment.” (Try hard not to be the first person with an idea. Wait, wait, wait! Silence makes many people uncomfortable, and eventually they tend to suggest something to end it. Then take any suggestion offered and help shape it into a viable plan.) “That’s a really interesting idea, Melissa! More reinforcement for getting his work done sounds good to me! Great starting place! Thanks! I wonder how we can do that since he isn’t completing a lot of work yet. Let’s talk about the nuts and bolts of when, how often, what it looks like and so forth. I think we are off to a great start!”

**5. Be aware of systemic issues and gather support hierarchically**

- **Key Concept:** Effecting consultee change often requires involvement of others hierarchically above the consultee in the school system, close colleagues and those the consultee supervises
- **Example:** *(Melissa has no idea how to effectively set up a classroom to support students with Autism, having had very little training or preparation. You have communicated this with decision makers who would like to find a way to help Melissa develop these skills. They have agreed to let her observe a skillful implementor with you, send her to a training and supervise/reinforce outcomes.)* “Melissa, this afternoon I noticed how attentive the students were briefly to your instruction. I wonder how we can get that same kind of attentiveness throughout the day. I was talking to Mr. Brown (program specialist) and mentioned this, and he said it would be possible for you and I to go look at a classroom he knows about where attentiveness is at a high level. You and this teacher might want to share some techniques. Would you like to do that? Ms. Smith (principal) tells me she really wants to help you implement any new ideas you observe so the students are more engaged. She even suggested funding to send you to a training as well! I think she is 100% behind you on this. I certainly know Jane and

Tom (colleague teachers) would love to hear about what we observe and would love to see it in action if we find strategies that seem appropriate to implement!” (*Compare this approach to a more typical and less compassionate interaction where the teacher is told she is not adequate and her skills need improvement now.*)

## 6. Separate consulting from supervision or documenting poor performance

- **Key concept:** If you come in to “help improve outcomes for students” you will find more receptivity than if you come in to “document the problems in this classroom”
- **Example:** If documentation, improvement plans must be developed, trade this role with another. Pair with a colleague who will perform documentation, performance improvement planning, etc. for you, and you do the same for him/her. S/he compassionately explains your consultant role following the improvement plan development. You then come into the classroom, shaping consultee behavior. Remember shaping means reinforcing closer and closer approximations of a consultee behavior you wish to increase.)

## 7. Identify barriers to change before you begin your consultation recommendations

- **Key concept:** The following are the most common barriers to implementation in my experience, followed by examples which may be helpful:
  - **Money**  
**Example:** “You might be thinking, how will we do some of these recommendations from our team with no additional funding. As we go over each recommendation, let’s frankly talk about whether funds are really necessary, or whether we can do this in lieu of some of the things we have been doing that haven’t worked.”
  - **Time**  
**Example:** “Let’s talk about the issue of time to do these changes if you think that might be a barrier. We can discuss ways we can solve our problem using other people or ways to do this in a different way. For example, I know a teacher who was having trouble getting all worksheets, including last-minute materials, enlarged in a timely fashion for a visually impaired student. She told me it suddenly occurred to her: I can have the student himself take things down to the Xerox machine and practice enlarging it some of the time!”
  - **Lack of expertise**  
**Example:** “In my experience doing some things in a different way is like learning to drive a car. It seems really difficult at first, but with practice, it gets easier. I can have Sue come in and model what we are talking about and give you feedback as well until we get this off the ground. That might really help; what do you think, Nick?”

➤ **Lack of commitment to teaching in general, and to individualized supports in particular**

**Example:** “Teaching really has become a challenging career hasn’t it. There are so many changes to keep up with! It sure would be easier if all the students in this class would perform like Kathy, huh. But since they don’t, we’ll have to put in a lot of supports for the students’ behavior until their behavior is up to our expectations, just like we design lessons for students whose academics aren’t on grade level yet. I know Mr. Brown (principal) is really planning on focusing on how to help teachers better individualize supports for the students so they can reach high academic standards. I can help you really enhance their performance and it will really stand out at this school.” (Involve principal, have him/her thank the teacher in advance for his/her efforts, communicating compassionately the extent of close scrutiny and feedback which will be given by the principal for outcomes.)

➤ **Lack of monitoring/performance appraisals**

**Example:** “Mr. Brown (principal) tells me he will be closely watching outcomes this year for all of our students. I’m really glad I came along because together we may be able to make a difference for your three problem students. I’ll be able to check in about once a week to see what further help I can give, and I know Mr. Brown will be dropping by your classroom—and no doubt asking me if their behavior is coming along as well.” (*The meta-message is clear---the consultee’s boss will be directly observing/monitoring performance. This is not a special education department issue—this is a school’s issue that directly affects how skillful this supervisor believes the consultee implements the plan.*)

➤ **Philosophical differences**

**Example:** “I do understand that you have not wanted in the past to use individualized reinforcers for behavior that you expect all your 4<sup>th</sup> graders to exhibit, Debbie. I too wish Jimmy would switch to a new behavior instead of tantruming to show his displeasure without reinforcement. It would be so much easier for teachers! But what we know about behavior change is this: the student was getting something or avoiding something in the past with this behavior. Until he can get what he wants, or appropriately express his displeasure, using the new behavior we will teach him, he will fall back on the old behavior. It is such a habit. We need him to really recognize the benefits of the new behavior, and generalize it to lots of situations. Only reinforcement will do that. Let’s talk about how we can do that with minimal disruptions in your class. Once he can do the behavior well, we can begin to slowly back off on reinforcers.”

➤ **Lack of reinforcement in general**

**Example:** “I noticed today that you didn’t tell any of the students they had done a good job, or that you are pleased with anyone’s individual performance. Have you found that all your students will still strive to do their best without this feedback? Are there any students who do not strive to do their best in your class?” (*Move into the rationale for reinforcement, overcoming the barrier of a consultee’s idea that it isn’t “fair” to give reinforcement to one student that all students don’t get*)

**Example:** “You may think “reinforcement for one student will result in other students saying that isn’t fair. Many teachers have overcome this concern by posting this rule after reviewing it with their students: “Everyone is entitled to a special program to help them improve a skill.” Then, if any student states something is “not fair”, the teacher can refer them to the rule, reminding them that they don’t need a special program for the same skill as the student in question, but that s/he could use help with another skill. Tell the student that you would be happy to meet with him/her, and maybe their parents to help them as well, since everyone is entitled. That tends to end the conversation!

## **8. Find ways to cue new behavior**

- **Key Concept: Consultees need prompting in order to assure implementation of the plan, and thus their new behavior, really occurs. Two to three times per week appears critical in the early phase.**
- **Examples:**
  - Whenever possible in the initial phase, come into the environment and cue using expectant facial expressions, or any gestures you have pre-discussed or you feel confident the teacher will interpret as a cue
  - Leave a message on their answering machine asking how it is going
  - Leave notes with secretary to place in consultee’s mailbox at intervals
  - Contact by phone during or after school

## **9. Reinforce Consultees thoughtfully, considering who delivers the reinforcer as well as frequency, power, immediacy and variety variables**

- **Key Concept: All new behavior is maintained by the reinforcement it receives. Sometimes reinforcement from others are even more powerful than from the consultant. The consultant arranges reinforcement thoughtfully by discovering what reinforcement will be most valued by the particular consultee.**
- **Examples:**
  - **Source**  
Superintendent, principal, district staff in general education as well as special education or other divisions, community groups, disability groups, PTA, student study teams, positive environment teams, family, student him/her self, colleagues, paraprofessionals, etc.
  - **Type**  
Awards, certificates, letters of commendation, praise, thank you notes, verbal expressions of thanks

- **Power**  
Letter of commendation for the teacher's personnel file from you or from his/her supervisor; opportunity to explain success to a faculty group; award given in front of the school board for achievement; opportunity to train others or have them observe in the environment;
- **Frequency**  
Minimally 2-3 contacts with the consultee the first week, with verbal or written praise from a valued source. Follow at intervals necessary to maintain consultee efforts.
- **Variety**  
Consider frequent, variable but low-power reinforcers, with less frequent higher-power reinforcers from time to time. Intermittent reinforcers will likely maintain the behavior if reinforcers have been given frequently enough initially. Most consultees do not need a high variety of reinforcers, but reinforcers from different sources and of increasing power can really impact sustainability.
- **Immediacy**  
For consultees just beginning his/her career, and for experienced but somewhat resistant staff, providing praise or gesture of approval immediately following the use of a new behavior is critical. Some consultees are especially concerned with doing it "right"; they will require immediacy of reinforcers.

#### **10. Establish follow-up schedule and persons who may assist you with this**

- **Key concept: The extent of reinforcement, monitoring and support necessary to maintain consultee behavior is critical to determine prior to consultant action**
- **Examples:**
  - Consultee to be observed informally by principal every week (with reinforcement as described above)
  - Consultant to inquire on success during lunch meeting, twice weekly