

# KNOW YOUR ZONES

The Consultant's Guide to Describing  
What You Can Do



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## The Consultant's Guide to Describing What You Can Do

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“ I found this tool enormously helpful! It really addresses how I succinctly tell people what I can do for them, which is the problem I've been grappling with. ”

– Lisa P.



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## Introduction

When I first made the transition to being a consultant, I was surprised that I struggled to describe to others what I could do, even though I had been in my field for 20 years. I had been very successful in my professional job. I had accomplished many good things. I was confident in my abilities. I had many examples of contributions I made to successful projects. I was respected for what I knew and what I could do. I thought it would be easy to take that experience and expertise and translate it into a concrete description of what I could do for a client. It turns out that it wasn't that easy. Part of the problem was that I was (and still am) a generalist. I had content and technical knowledge and skills, but my primary expertise was in figuring things out, designing strategies to address problems, getting people to agree, and moving things forward. These are the very skills that make for a great consultant, but how the heck do you describe that in a way that makes a client say, "Please come do that for me"?

During my time as a consultant at a national firm that constantly hired new people, I got to see that this was a common experience for new consultants. It didn't matter if they had been highly successful CEOs or highly praised mid-career professionals. I have seen so many smart and skilled people spend months and sometimes years wrestling with not only how to describe what they can do but also how to feel confident in selling their services to clients. New consultants often underestimate the value they bring to a client and think they can only do the specific things that they have done before. On the other end of the spectrum, I've also seen new consultants oversell themselves, say that they can do anything, and then fail to deliver on those promises to a client.

**So how do you find that sweet spot, where you can easily describe what you truly can do and can reliably make good on your promises?**

## Know Your Zones

Using this assessment tool will help you clarify what your sweet spots are today and what they could be in the future by investing some time and effort. I call this **Know Your Zones**. Knowing your zones means being clear about what you can do for your clients based on your experience and skills. Knowing your zones will help you more precisely and accurately articulate what you can do for potential clients and, if you work with others, what you can do as part of teams. It will help you meet your clients' needs and delight them so that they keep coming back for more and tell other potential clients how much they need your help, too!

The good news is that you don't only have one zone to operate in or grow into. As the next page graphic shows, I've defined four zones, which are based on your knowledge and skills. I will describe what each zone is and then help you clarify what goes into each of your zones.

“Knowing your zones will help you more precisely and accurately articulate what you can do for potential clients.”

# 1

## ZONE 1: COMFORT ZONE

This is your primary sweet spot. You've done this type of work before, and you did it well. You have specific knowledge and skills that you have used to do this work.

# 2

## ZONE 2: EASY STRETCH ZONE

You have done similar work but not exactly this work. However, you are confident that you have transferable knowledge and skills that you can successfully apply to this work.

# 3

## ZONE 3: DEEP STRETCH ZONE

You have not done this type of work before. You have some knowledge and skills that are useful, but you need to get some additional knowledge and skills to do it well or work with others who can bring something essential that you do not have.

# 4

## ZONE 4: NO-GO ZONE

You have not done this work and will not do it well, even with additional knowledge and skills. Don't go there! Let someone else do this work who can give the client what they need.



### **Confidence: It's not what you think.**

I am a pretty darn confident consultant, and I get asked by other people all the time where my confidence comes from. It's really quite simple: my confidence comes not from thinking that I know or can do everything but from knowing that I don't have to. I have my superpowers, but I don't have to have every superpower. It's about being comfortable with the reality that I have a lot to offer my clients, but sometimes they need things that someone else is better than me at giving them. Knowing that is liberating for me and helps make sure my clients get the best.

# Hard Skills and Soft Skills

Now that we've defined what the zones are, the next step in clarifying your zones is to understand what types of knowledge and skills you bring to being a consultant. There are two main categories of skills: hard skills and soft skills. Both are critical for consultants, but the key to being a great consultant means being able to apply a combination of both hard and soft skills. What's the difference between the two? Well...

## HARD SKILLS

Your technical or functional knowledge and abilities to perform specific tasks.

### Examples:

- Content expertise
- Writing
- Editing
- Presenting
- Project design and planning
- Project management
- Data analytics
- Data management
- Data mining
- Research
- Forecasting
- Market analysis
- Systems analysis
- Business planning
- Finance
- Program design
- Performance measurement development
- Quantitative assessment or evaluation
- Qualitative assessment or evaluation
- Risk assessment
- Using software programs
- Building and/or using technology
- Programming
- Marketing
- Logistics
- Graphic design
- Spoken and written foreign languages

## SOFT SKILLS

Your interpersonal and social knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and attributes.

### Examples:

- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Resolving conflicts
- Active listening
- Facilitating
- Collaborating
- Relationship building
- Team building and coaching
- Creative thinking
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Showing and inspiring confidence
- Influencing/persuading
- Negotiating
- Building trust
- Engaging and motivating
- Setting and managing expectations
- Defining and communicating vision and ideas
- Managing group dynamics
- Managing change
- Selling and closing a deal
- Political savvy
- Social and cultural awareness
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Paying attention to detail
- Managing time
- Mentoring and coaching
- Being empathetic and building rapport
- Being adaptable/flexible

Again, the key is being able to blend hard and soft skills when you are working with a client. For example, when I am designing a project, I have to apply hard skills such as analyzing the problem and identifying what can solve the problem my client wants solved, establishing project goals and timeframes, defining the critical components of the project, defining the right sequence of steps to complete the project, and so on.

I need soft skills to create a project design that is going to work in a particular situation with a particular set of people in a particular setting. Having the right soft skills increases the likelihood that they will adopt my design and are willing and able to make it or, in some cases, let it move forward. I have to apply soft skills such as active listening to understand what the real or layered problems are that they are trying to solve. I have

to build trust so that they believe that I can help them solve the problems. I have to understand the context for the project so that I design a project that won't get stalled or dismissed because of interpersonal, cultural, and/or political dynamics. I have to facilitate the client's decision-making process, especially if there are many options to choose from or they have different perspectives about what the best thing to do is. I have to help them prioritize what is most important to do first and help them manage change in a way that anticipates resistance and maximizes acceptance.

**If you have been involved in a successful project before, you used your hard and soft skills to help make it happen, even if you didn't know that's what you did!**

## Clarify Your Zones

Now let's get clear about what goes in your zones. In this exercise, I will walk through a series of steps that will help you clarify your zones based on your past experiences.

**TIP** The best thing to do during this exercise is to be honest with yourself. Try not to diminish or inflate your past successes and what you did to contribute to those successes. Also, be honest with yourself about what didn't work out so well and what skills you didn't have or didn't apply as well as you would have liked. Remember, you don't have to have every superpower, but it is important to know what is true for you today.

**TIP** Be as specific as possible. For example, if one of your skills is writing, write down the specific type(s) of writing you can do such as writing technical documents, grants, policy reports or briefs, policy and procedure documentation, and/or marketing copy. This will help you more precisely clarify what you can offer a client and help you articulate it to a potential client.

**What if...** You can't think of anything you do well? Well, in almost every case, you have a confidence problem not a competency problem. You may want to ask people you have worked with and who you trust will be honest with you to help you clarify what you do well. You could ask questions like:

- ▶ What do you think I do best?
- ▶ What things do I do that you think adds to the success of projects?
- ▶ What is an example of a contribution I made to a project that you think made an important difference?

## STEP 1

# Think of Past Projects and Accomplishments

Think of a successful project or accomplishment from your previous work. Now write down your answers to each question below in the space provided.

You can repeat this exercise with other examples to help you flesh out the details of your zones. You can do this step as many times as you like. The more examples you do, the more complete a picture you will have. I would suggest you do it with at least 3 examples. You can go to the Appendix for more worksheets.

### What was the project or accomplishment?

**Example:** *I helped my client design a growth strategy for their new data analytics services.*

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### What were the outcomes or results of the project or accomplishment?

**Example:** *The client's revenue increased by 8%, or the client launched their new program.*

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### What was your role?

**Example:** *I did an assessment of the problems; researched, identified, and presented potential solutions; facilitated their decision-making process; and developed a work plan for implementing the solutions they selected.*

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**What did you contribute to the success of the project?**

**Hard skills you used:**

**Example:** *Project management, market analysis, research, qualitative assessment, and performance measurement development*

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**Soft skills you used:**

**Example:** *Building trust, problem solving, meeting management, active listening, political savvy, social and cultural awareness, facilitating, prioritizing, negotiating, resolving conflicts, and managing change*

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**What hard and soft skills were critical to achieving the outcome but were not skills you were able to contribute?**

**Example:** *Operational assessment, data analysis, financial modeling/projections, and budgeting*

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## STEP 2 Zone It!

The next step is to take details from your examples and place them in each zone—starting with your comfort zone!

### Zone 1: Comfort Zone

**Definition:** *You have done this type of work before, and you did it well. You have specific knowledge and skills that you used in your successful project or accomplishment.*

Write down what knowledge and skills are you very comfortable offering to a client.

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### Zone 2: Easy Stretch Zone

**Definition:** *You have done similar work but not exactly this work. In your successful project or accomplishment, you used knowledge and skills that you can successfully apply to other work.*

Write down what knowledge and skills you could use with a client that aren't exactly what you've done but could still help them.

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### Zone 3: Deep Stretch Zone

**Definition:** *You have not done this type of work before. In your successful project or accomplishment, you used some knowledge and skills that could be useful, but you need to get some additional knowledge and skills to do it well or work with others who can bring something essential that you do not have.*

Write down what knowledge and skills you could use with a client that aren't exactly what you've done but could still help them.

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### Zone 4: No-Go Zone

**Definition:** *You have not done this work and will not do it well, even with additional knowledge and skills. Don't go there! Let someone else do this work who can give the client what they need.*

Write down what knowledge and skills you do not have and would never do well.

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## STEP 3 Say It!

The next step is to take details from the last two exercises and create statements you can say to potential clients or colleagues that describe:

- ▶ **What you can do**
- ▶ **Examples of each**
- ▶ **How you can do it**

### TIP

A common mistake I see consultants make is only talking to clients about what they can do or have done and not *how* they do it. Clients want to know what you can help them accomplish, but they also need to understand and trust that you know how to get them there. It is a critical step in establishing your credibility with them.

### What You Can Do and How You Do It

**1** Using your answers from the previous two exercises, finish these statements using examples in your Comfort Zone and Easy Stretch Zone. Write as many statements as you can. Use another piece of paper if you have more!

If you use Easy Stretch Zone examples of similar work, write down how it is transferable to other types of work. When you are in front of a potential client, you will need to say how they are transferable. Do not expect them to make that mental leap! You have to do it for them.

**2** Then give a brief example of each. In your examples, include specific results if you can.

**Example:** *I can help develop ambitious but achievable strategies to increase productivity. I led the development and execution of a productivity strategy at my company that resulted in a 12% increase in productivity in one year. That was the largest increase the company had achieved in the past 5 years.*

**3** For each “I can” statement, give a brief description of what you did to accomplish what you did. You will use these descriptions in two ways: 1) to give past examples if they ask and/or 2) to help you articulate to a client what you would propose doing to help them accomplish their goals. In your examples, include specific challenges you overcame.

**Example:** *In developing the strategies to increase productivity, I started with data analysis to assess what the productivity problems were. For example, I reviewed data to assess any variations in productivity by site and by employee. That review revealed that three sites had significantly lower productivity. I then conducted site visits to assess the issues at each site...*

## STEP 3 WORKSHEET

I can...

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Example:

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How you do it:

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I can...

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Example:

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How you do it:

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**STEP 3 WORKSHEET**

I can...

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Example:

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How you do it:

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I can...

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Example:

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How you do it:

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### What about...my Deep Stretch Zone and No-Go Zone?

These are helpful if a potential client or colleague asks you if you can do work that falls into these zones.

- ▶ If it's in your **Deep Stretch Zone**, you can say things like, "I can help with a piece of that work, but I would need to have someone else who does \_\_\_\_\_"
- ▶ If it's in your **No-Go Zone**, then say, "That is not something I can help you with." If you can, give them the name of someone else who can help them.

## Test and Practice Your Descriptions

Now that you know your zones and have developed language to describe what you can offer a client, test it on a few people. Ask people who are in your field to listen to your examples and give you feedback. The goal is to make sure what you're saying is clear and will resonate with potential clients. You could ask questions like:

- ▶ What could make my descriptions clearer to potential clients?
- ▶ What could make my descriptions more likely to resonate with a potential client and make them want to hire me?
- ▶ What other improvements would you suggest that could help me get business?

Based on their feedback, make some refinements to your descriptions. Then practice, practice, practice! You want to get very comfortable saying the descriptions of what you can offer before you get in front of clients.

## Go Get 'em!

Now you're ready to help potential clients understand why they need to hire you and what you can do to help them. I hope this guidebook helped you identify and articulate your consulting superpowers! For more tips, tools, and resources, go to [www.craftofconsulting.com](http://www.craftofconsulting.com).

Happy consulting!



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## APPENDIX

You can fill in more examples of your past projects and accomplishments below.

**Then go back to Step 2 and zone it!**

**EXAMPLE #:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What was the project or accomplishment?**

**Example:** *I helped my client design a growth strategy for their \_\_\_\_\_ services.*

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**What were the outcomes or results of the project or accomplishment?**

**Example:** *The client's revenue increased by 8%, or the client launched their new program.*

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**What was your role?**

**Example:** *I did an assessment of the problems; researched, identified, and presented potential solutions; facilitated their decision-making process; and developed a work plan for implementing the solutions they selected.*

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**What did you contribute to the success of the project?**

**Hard skills you used:**

**Example:** *Project management, market analysis, research, qualitative assessment, and performance measurement development*

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**Soft skills you used:**

**Example:** *Building trust, problem solving, meeting management, active listening, political savvy, social and cultural awareness, facilitating, prioritizing, negotiating, resolving conflicts, and managing change*

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