

Working with Consultants

**Roger Kim & Mei-ying Williams, Asian Pacific Environmental Network
Carol Cantwell, Fun With Financials**

Interview 10/3/2012

1. What resulted from the consulting project that was transformative?

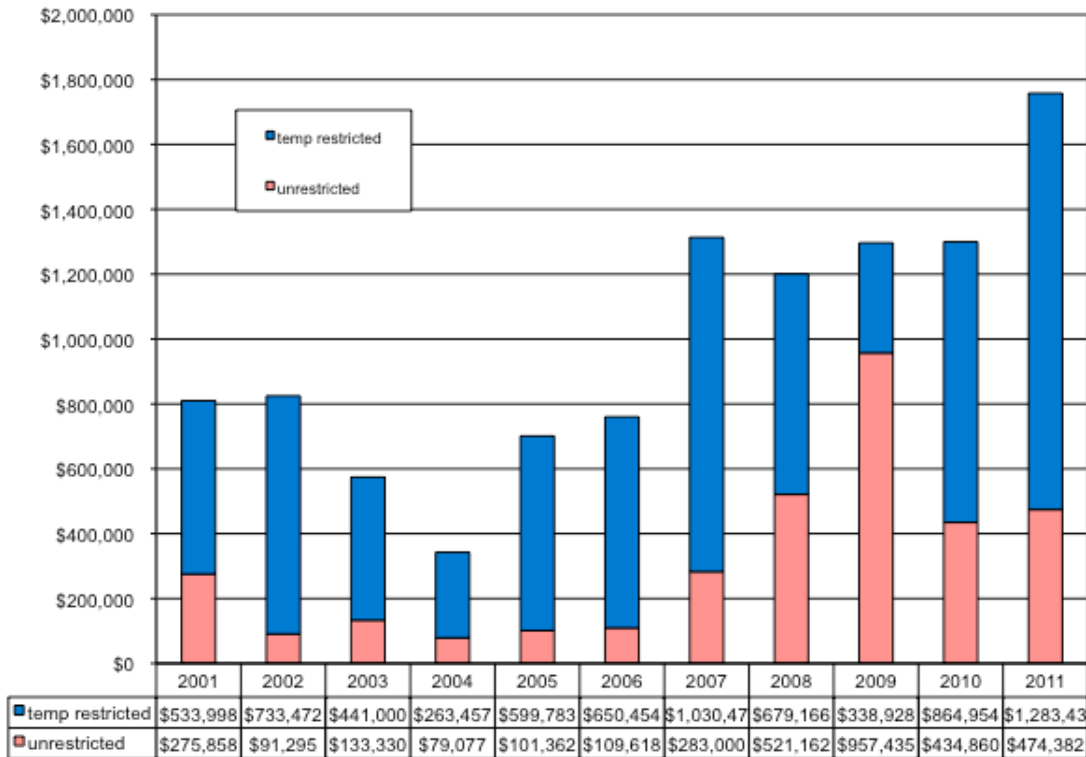
Roger: Very simply, Carol worked with us to completely overhaul our financial systems and transferred knowledge to us to a point now where we have an incredible, high level of confidence in how we're tracking our resources, spending our resources, able to budget and plan with our resources. That transformation really happened on all levels of the organization - staff who are engaged day-to-day with finances, and me, the ED to run the organization, and our board that has increased their level of understanding of their role in financial management, and having the skills to read financial statements and make sense of them.

Mei-ying: The breadth of transformation has been major. A key part is Carol's specific expertise in training and making financial engagement really accessible. *"Fun with Financials"* is a genuine core belief. It's true and it runs throughout the work that she offers. Every facet of her expertise shines through in her visits and check-in's. She has a great level of confidence and expertise that unfortunately not every consultant brings. Carol has helped heightened our level of confidence and skills necessary at APEN that has had a major impact on our work.

Carol: Two things: one was when I first started working with APEN, it was mostly the ED who dealt with finances. Now the board is engaged at a more strategic level. The whole staff gets finances, including program staff; everyone is involved at a whole new level. If you look at the numbers, I pulled up the 990s from 2003 – 2010. Back then, APEN had two months of reserves and seven months of grant funding that was temporarily restricted. In 2010, the budget grew over 50%, now they have four months of reserves, and nine months of temporary restricted funding. It actually works. In a period of overall economic and funding decrease, APEN is at a really healthy place. The principle, transmitted in the consultation, has been deeply imbedded in the organization's DNA even when there are new staff and board members.

Roger: Take a look at our financial graphs and trends from 2004 – 2010 from the most recent audit. You see it.

**APEN
Net Assets at End of Year 2001-2010**



2. How was APEN "ready" for this project?

Roger: Carol’s consulting with APEN pre-dates my time. In 2004, APEN faced a financial crisis when we engaged Carol. The crisis created the opportunity for us. Beyond that, there was a readiness among all the key segments of the organization to engage in this overhaul. From staff to board to management team to ED, we all took on certain responsibilities to fully engage with finances. Also helpful that this was an organizational-wide priority and not just working with the ED alone. This was a systematic organizational-wide initiative to take on this project. It’s much more imbedded in the DNA as it has evolved.

Mei-ying: The initial working with Carol happened way before me, and I’m thankful for having that in place when I came on board. It’s so much rooted in the time we live in, the level of crisis, larger context in which we operate. It’s felt in the organization as we see allies and comrades in other places not being able to get their organizations off the ground, or have had to downsize... they may have a half time person engaged in financial literacy while the organization has a lot at stake. This project has been driven by all levels in APEN that came out of having a real sense of what’s at stake if we didn’t do it. Everyone has an appetite to want to know more in general. How could it be a clandestine process... where only the ED knows about the finances? Carol really supports a high level of transparency.

Carol: When I was engaged by APEN, they were in the middle of a second ED transition in less than a year. APEN had been through a pretty significant deficit that was more than a couple of months. They were facing a similar thing in 2004, seriousness of the financial situation, and ED transition that hadn't "worked out." There was a hunger to make this ED transition to really work. APEN has an organizational development consultant through the ED transitions. Some groundwork was laid before I walked in the door and a recognized need for change. APEN was in a place where they realized they've got to do something when I got there, and they were more able to listen to me. They didn't have a lot of confidence and were more willing to defer to the "expert." My job is to give them the confidence to do it themselves. My original engagement came thru the McKay foundation, and when the project is supported by a funder, it tends to put people on a higher alert, "Oh a funder is funding this so I'd better take advantage of this."

3. What are two or three things that made your partnership tick?

Mei-ying: I really like Carol. She's super modest. She really is an expert. I appreciate that she is driven to be of service. Her motivation is not just trying to get inside an organization and then leave. But she's committed to sustaining the relationship and the organization for the long haul. She had been a director and has a level of an insider's lens. Consultants are here to be of service and she takes that to heart. She's really personable, and a fantastic comrade. She's also really smart, not just about finances but larger trends, what's on the horizon, foreshadowing.

Roger: Ditto! Same theme as Carol brings her financial expertise as well as a commitment to movement organizations and understanding of the work we're trying to do and how hard and challenging to make cultural change, especially with finances. She also gets other organizational development dynamics that come into play. Her breadth of knowledge with QuickBooks, accounting rules, how to set up the systems, and deep organizational wide initiative approach with an understanding that it won't stick unless there's a cultural shift. She's able to work with the Board, and people who handle the finances day-to-day. She's always responsive to our needs in the moment. Something always came up with the latest audit, getting questions we didn't know how to answer, re-doing certain things in our books, or all of a sudden we have a major campaign, crisis or not. That level of responsiveness and the credit that goes to the funder for resourcing us with Carol, driven by the needs of the organization in particular moments were all essential.

Carol: I appreciated the most is APEN's leaders' willingness to be completely open and honest, both about what's going well and what's not going well; being open about the whole organization, not just the management team or the board's treasurer. But everyone knew what we were trying to change. APEN has a deep culture to learn and evaluate to be better really showed up in the consultation. There was also a willingness to trust. I was a brand new consultant when I started and they were my first client. There was a real willingness to trust what I was saying. I knew it was a many year transition... the shift couldn't have happened in 6

months. The ED thought it would take a few months and then we could get back to “normal.” But I said no no no... it’s not going back.

There was also flexibility on the funder’s part. McKay was open to how much work was needed and the length of time required for this culture shift. They gave really generous capacity building support. We had complete control on what to do and how much time to take with minimal reports and through APEN and not through me. I wasn’t required to say what was happening. This combination of generous timeline allowed for the flexibility to work in phases that made sense to the work of the organization. When people moved on there was the need to refresh training.

4. Assuming Roger and Mei-ying has worked with consultants before, what made this partnership with Carol different? More joyous? More impact? And, for Carol, you've worked with lots of social sector leaders, what made Roger and Mei-ying stand out?

Mei-ying: Carol ‘s a Giants fan! That makes it more joyous. High level of sports culture awareness, this is not always the case with consultants, or co-workers. It makes for good banter. Skills level, political/world level, faith and trust at a human level. Everything builds from there that allows us to carry on fun ways in our interactions with each other.

Carol: There’s legitimate friendship and affection, with the organizational team and me. Not in a way that jeopardizes the work. We’re all very serious about the work, and nice to have this other aspect that enhances the work.

5. Looking back, knowing what you know now, what's one thing you would have done differently?

Roger: More refreshers with staff and board on skills training to review our finances. It’s important that I and Mei-ying do that but to have external expertise to come in to validate and support that. I would’ve set aside more of Carol’s time to do those things with the entire organization.

Mei-ying: Having more time with Carol at onset. I went to CompassPoint trainings as well as working with Carol. In some ways, I wish I had gotten more time with Carol. The level of 1:1 attention and training would have been great.

Carol: would have wanted a real deep train-the-trainers handbook for staff and board. I know Roger has been doing that with new people, and bring more confidence to that piece. Spreading the lesson to APEN’s network as a whole. The last couple of years organizations have been struggling... how to use APEN’s work to strengthen others. Pushing the conversation to a higher level. That’s what I would do in the future.

6. What about cultural competence?

Mei-ying: With Carol not being from an API background, it's an authenticity question. Her intention and authenticity shined through. I have worked with consultants who are culturally ignorant. I didn't feel that from Carol at all. Fundamentally, people being authentic is really important, not putting on airs at all.

Roger: Carol comes with skills and working with diverse people, language and cultures, backgrounds, making everyone feel comfortable especially in the trainings. It all comes back to the core values of who she is and how she does the work, and the mission that guides her... training up organizations on finances, changing the world for the better. That shined through in the work. She could easily fit right in as a staff at APEN.

Carol: #1 is working as a white person in the social justice movement, you've got to have a really strong sense of yourself and who you are in the world. I have a value of listening. That's how you learn from others. Willing to listen and pay attention. You learn a lot really quickly when you take that stance. For me, I see it as not one culture at APEN, but many cultures happening, and everyone has to learn and exchange mode. Not one dominant culture. So it's a good place to do that experimentation and exchange. Being willing to listen and learn, and being curious. I have a basic curiosity about what makes people tick and how to translate these concepts so people can get them no matter where they come from. I have a strong analysis of liberation and oppression. Being humble about who I am, understanding myself really well.

7. How did you find each other?

Originally through the McKay Foundation. They were working with an OD (organizational development) consultant. APEN got a general support grant. Gave them access to capacity building. The OD consultant referred Carol to APEN.