

“THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF LEADERSHIP IS NOT STRATEGY – IT’S EXECUTION”

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One of the founders of C&S Partners dispenses advice on how best to “materialize leadership”, tells us what sets C&S Partners apart, and shares observations at C&S Partners’s three-year mark.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND BEFORE C&S PARTNERS.

Jean-Marie. An engineer by background, I like industrial environments, I began consulting 25 years ago. I worked for many years in the automotive industry, and then in energy; I joined Schlumberger as they started a business consulting group. That’s where I met Fernand Lanca and Gérald Bouhourd.

From there, I specialised in oil and gas, in which I’ve spent over a decade. I then joined Accenture Strategy for 3-4 years after it had acquired Schlumberger Business Consulting. This is when Fernand, Gérald joined forces to start C&S Partners. We had stayed in touch throughout the years, and had nurtured this idea. Three years ago, that idea came to life.

At the time, I was based in Houston; I’d lived there when working for Schlumberger and Accenture. So I was well placed to set up the Houston arm of C&S Partners.

WHAT DROVE YOU, FERNAND, THIERRY AND GÉRALD TO SET UP C&S PARTNERS?

We all came from management consulting, which had gone from having small teams focused on solving executive client problems to favouring big implementation projects, often with a

commercial bias. So C&S was a way to reconnect more genuinely to clients. We had a lot of industry connections; they keep asking us, can you work with us the way you used to?

Being in big firms, there's a lot of baggage to carry. We wanted to be light and totally independent from big structures. The way to get back to what we liked to do – really connecting to clients, being directly engaged, and taking in a genuine, problem-solving, client-centric approach to consulting.

WHAT DOES THE COMPANY MOTTO “MATERIALIZING LEADERSHIP” MEAN TO YOU?

We think the most difficult part of leadership today – and it's also part of what drove C&S Partners – is not so much formulating a strategy but getting the leadership team to actually make it happen. We saw so many cases where a good strategy failed because the team in charge of the execution was dysfunctional. Not because the individuals were not qualified, but because the leadership team dynamics was not effective, and the total was less than the sum of the parts.

Not having the end result in mind - what the overall outcomes of a transformation should be, and not just each of its components - is a big pitfall.

WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES AT C&S PARTNERS, AND WHO ARE YOUR MAJOR CLIENTS?

My major in consulting for many years has been connecting the structure with the people. At C&S Partners, there are those who are working more on individuals, and those who work more on structures, and on the mechanisms put in place for the leadership team to have optimal organisation and cooperation.

You need to have three things: the right structure, the right competencies and the right behaviours. My role is more to do with structures and competencies. Others works more on the other aspects and we blend our skillsets and experiences to get the full result. And we are very hands-on, we make things work, we are not just pushing concepts.

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The people side is very important. We often work with HR teams to ensure they acquire and develop the right talent; having the right tools to manage individual and team performance is also critical.

Since I'm based in Houston, most of my clients are in Energy if not Oil and Gas: from Super Majors to smaller Independents and through the various types of services companies.

DO YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE IN M&A?

In my consulting journey, especially in the last few years, I've spent time helping oil and gas clients, navigating the huge storm associated with a fairly brutal industry downturn that combined a cyclical trough with the more systemic take-off of the energy transition. The industry went from a rapid expansion to a rapid contraction. Companies have had to adjust in many ways, including through divestments, mergers and many other types of portfolio adjustments. I have advised a lot around the organizational and people implications of those changes – asset acquisitions, business spin-offs, mergers. Especially around planning and executing transactions – combining or splitting organizations and leadership teams, and getting the new company to quickly function properly and deliver the benefits it is expecting from the transaction.

WHAT ARE YOUR OBSERVATIONS NOW THAT YOU ARE CELEBRATING THE THREE-YEAR MARK AT C&S PARTNERS?

We've gone from working with clients we knew well to working with new clients. We've been expanding the business, but it's been a controlled expansion. There's a strong commitment to values: we have brought in like-minded people with a common background or fit, and have evolved step by step to maintain our strong value core, and the connection we have with our clients.

Three years is a lot of time, but it's also a very short space of time to do all that we've done, with the trajectory we have. We're currently engaged on projects with about a dozen clients out of a portfolio of about 20 longstanding and repeat-business clients. We started with only two or three, so our growth has been rapid.

HOW DO YOU DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF FROM COMPETITORS?

We are clearly different from the big companies: they need to “standardize” their offerings, focus on large projects, leverage their partners to balance their economics and, they also need to be consensual and have a very broad reach to keep their pace of growth. This is fine, but we have made a different choice; we want to be true to our principles, have strong opinions, challenge C-suite executives and have impact. You may not always like what you hear, but our advices are ultimately eye-opening. We bring a set of tools, skillsets and experience with us, not least through our [“four pillars”](#). But we look at client problems on a case-by-case basis, and adjust our approaches accordingly.

WHERE DO YOU SEE C&S PARTNERS IN FIVE YEARS AND IN TEN YEARS?

Even at the three-year point, our momentum is picking-up. But we still know each other very well. We can replicate the growth we’ve already experienced, almost like cell mitosis, maybe going from 10 to 30+ partners in three years. This is easy to see happening.

But beyond another three-year horizon, it’s difficult to say. We don’t want to lose our soul and purpose, which is to materialize leadership. Size will not be the only thing we pursue. We have not specifically discussed how big we’d like to become; what we need to focus on is impact. We will certainly diversify from energy and asset intensive sectors into other sectors, for example – but we still want to intimately understand our clients and their business context and bring industry acumen to any project.



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