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Operationalizing the Triple R: A Refined Framework for Consulting Engagement and Evaluation

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Abstract

Despite the growing reliance on management consultants in strategic decision-making, there remains a lack of coherent, actionable frameworks for evaluating the quality of consulting interventions. This article operationalises the Triple R (3Rs) Framework - Research, Recommendations, and Rational - as a conceptual model that encapsulates the minimal but essential criteria of high-impact consulting practice (Kamel, 2025). Drawing on practitioner experience, case insights, and synthesis of consulting scholarship, the framework is advanced as both a diagnostic and prescriptive tool. It is argued that the 3Rs enable clearer assessment of consultant value, bridge the gap between theory and application, and respond to growing calls for transparency, rigor, and logic in managerial decision support.

Introduction

In recent decades, the scope and influence of management consultants have expanded dramatically, influencing strategy, transformation, and governance across sectors. Yet, amid this proliferation, a persistent paradox endures: while consultants claim to deliver value through expertise and insight, clients often struggle to evaluate what constitutes "good" consulting. As Christensen, Wang and van Bever (2013) note, clients hire consultants for help but seldom possess robust criteria for judging whether that help is, in fact, helpful.

This article responds to this gap by refining the Triple R (3Rs) Framework, which identifies three essential components of value-added consulting: Research, Recommendations, and Rational (Kamel, 2025). This paper operationalises the foundational principles established by Kamel (2025) by deepening its conceptual underpinnings, elaborating its practical application through detailed client-side due diligence protocols, and exploring its broader implications for consulting pedagogy and professional accountability. The aim is to transition the 3Rs from a conceptual model into a robust, operational tool for practitioners and clients alike. We propose the framework as a step toward a practitioner-centred theory of consulting - one grounded not only in analytical rigor, but also in transparency, inspectability and client-side evaluative capability.

This article is written for consulting practitioners, clients of consulting services, and educators who seek clear, practical criteria for evaluating the quality of consulting advice.

The Need for a Grounded Evaluation Framework

The consulting literature has tended to oscillate between two extremes: macro-level critiques (e.g. consultants as carriers of managerial ideology or commodified knowledge) and micro-level process studies that dissect tools and techniques (e.g. issue trees, MECE structures or workshop facilitation). What remains undertheorised is a mid-level evaluative model that clients themselves can use to assess consulting deliverables during and after engagements.

We argue that without such a framework, consultancy remains vulnerable on two fronts: epistemic opacity (clients cannot trace how conclusions were reached) and outcome ambiguity (recommendations lack clear traction or justification). The Triple R Framework is designed to address both concerns by making consulting work explicit, assessable and auditable (Kamel, 2025).

The Triple R Framework

1. Research: Grounding in Diagnostic Discovery

At the foundation of effective consultancy lies rigorous, context-sensitive research. This involves more than data collection; it is the structured inquiry that enables the consultant to frame the right problem before proposing solutions.

Research in the consulting context involves:

- Diagnosis: Clear articulation of the client's problem, bounded scope and success criteria
- Discovery: Collection of qualitative and quantitative data across stakeholder levels
- Contextualisation: Positioning findings within the relevant industry, institutional and organisational environment

Consulting research must balance deductive structure with inductive openness. Unlike academic research, the goal is not theory building but problem-specific clarity. Weak or superficial research increases the risk of misdiagnosis and undermines confidence in downstream recommendations.

2. Recommendations: Delivering Clear, Relevant and Actionable Advice
Recommendations constitute the most visible output of consultancy work, yet they are also the most uneven in quality. Building explicitly on Henningsson and Ketokivi's (2018) notion of actionable knowledge, the 3Rs framework advances their argument by embedding actionability not only in the content of recommendations but also in their evaluability by clients. In other words, recommendations are actionable not merely when they can be implemented, but when clients can clearly see what to do, why to do it and whether it fits their constraints.

Strong recommendations meet three criteria:

- Clarity: Unambiguous articulation of what should be done
- Relevance: Alignment with the client's strategic priorities and organisational context
- Actionability: Practical feasibility, including resource, capability and governance considerations

Recommendations that are overly abstract (e.g. "become more customer-centric") or overly mechanistic (e.g. tool-driven checklists without strategic logic) fail to create decision value.

3. Rational: Articulating the Logic of the Advice
The third - and most neglected - dimension is Rational, defined as the explicit reasoning that links research findings to recommendations (Kamel, 2025). The term Rational is used deliberately rather than alternatives such as Logic or Justification because it captures not only internal coherence, but also reasonableness, evidentiary grounding and contestability. In practice, this dimension is most often implicit, assumed or skipped entirely, despite being central to client trust and learning.

This dimension builds directly on Christensen et al.'s (2013) concern that clients lack visibility into how consultants transform analysis into advice, and on Pfeffer and Sutton's (2006) call for evidence-based management. The 3Rs framework advances these ideas by operationalising evidence-based reasoning as an explicit, inspectable consulting deliverable rather than a normative aspiration.

The Rational dimension includes:

- Causal logic: How findings are interpreted to support conclusions
- Assumptions: What conditions must hold true for the advice to work

- Alternatives: What options were considered and why they were rejected

Rational functions as the integrity layer of consulting. Its absence renders even technically sound recommendations fragile and difficult to defend or adapt.

Empirical Illustration: A Retail Transformation Engagement

To illustrate the utility of the 3Rs, consider a consulting engagement with a regional retail chain experiencing declining profitability. Preliminary assumptions blamed e-commerce competition. However, structured research (interviews, financial diagnostics, and ethnographic store visits) revealed deeper issues: an aging core customer base and outdated in-store design.

Based on this, the consulting team issued three recommendations: (1) resegment customers by lifecycle value, (2) redesign store layouts to match current shopper journeys, and (3) recalibrate frontline incentives to support cross-channel engagement.

The Rational was documented in a causal logic model linking customer data to store experience, to conversion metrics, to margin shifts. This made the reasoning traceable and actionable, demonstrating the framework's practical application as outlined by Kamel (2025).

Conceptual Contribution

The Triple R Framework makes three distinct contributions to the literature on consulting and knowledge work:

1. Bridging theory and practice: It translates abstract principles of knowledge production (research), decision support (recommendation), and epistemic justification (rational) into a coherent practice model.
2. Creating evaluative standards: It offers clients and firms a way to evaluate the process, not just the outcomes, of consulting work.
3. Responding to epistemological critique: It addresses critiques of consulting as ideologically opaque by requiring transparency in logic and method.

Moreover, the 3Rs can be integrated into consulting pedagogy, internal strategy processes, and performance evaluations, extending its utility beyond the initial conceptualization.

Implications for Practice

To strengthen practical utility for clients and senior practitioners, the 3Rs can be used as a due diligence checklist for evaluating consulting proposals and final deliverables.

Client-Side Due Diligence Using the 3Rs

Research – Questions to Ask

- What data sources and stakeholders informed the diagnosis?

- How was the problem framed and bounded?
- What contextual factors were explicitly considered?

Recommendations – Questions to Ask
- Is it unambiguously clear what actions are being proposed?
- Are the recommendations tailored to our strategy and constraints?
- What resources or capabilities are required for implementation?

Rational – Questions to Ask
- How exactly do the findings lead to these recommendations?
- What assumptions must hold for success?
- What credible alternatives were considered and rejected?

Used in this way, the 3Rs transform clients from passive recipients of advice into informed evaluators of consulting quality, operationalizing the framework's core premise.

Conclusion

As the boundaries between consultants, strategists and data scientists blur -and as AI automates portions of analysis- human judgment becomes the primary source of consulting value. The Triple Rs Framework -Research, Recommendations and Rational- offers a disciplined, transparent and teachable way to structure, evaluate and defend that judgment (Kamel, 2025). By making consulting work inspectable rather than opaque, the framework repositions consulting as a reflective, accountable professional practice rather than a purely rhetorical or transactional service.

For consulting firms, the 3Rs establish a defensible standard of consulting quality; for clients, they convert consulting advice from rhetoric into an accountable input to strategic decision-making. This development of the original framework provides refinement and practical tools for enhancing consulting value across engagements.

References

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