

How Leopards Change Their Spots: Developing Technical Consultants into Business Development Leads

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Abstract

Technical professionals, those with backgrounds in IT, engineering, mathematics, or science, frequently struggle to progress into senior commercial roles in professional service firms. Most existing interventions try to close this gap by transferring soft skills such as selling, relationship building, or objection handling. Drawing on identity literature, this paper argues that skills-transfer interventions are largely ineffective because they ignore the deeper challenge: business development threatens the moral and competence-based identity of technical professionals more than it exposes a gap in their knowledge. Building on what the evidence shows works in identity-based change, this paper sets out an identity-shifting intervention and tests it with 15 technical consultants across four professional service firms over six months. The findings identify the conditions under which durable change occurs. The paper argues for an identity-shifting methodology that surfaces the ethical and emotional resistance to selling, leads with behaviour rather than belief, and reinforces the new identity through manager support and structured mastery experiences.

Introduction: The Technical–Commercial Paradox

Professional service firms (PSFs) face a structural problem that has persisted for decades. They recruit heavily from technical fields (e.g. IT, engineering, data science) acquiring “I-shaped” professionals whose self-worth is bound up in vertical expertise and binary problem-solving. As these individuals progress, organisational requirements shift toward “T-shaped” capabilities: relationship building, commercial influence, and the ability to operate in ambiguity. For most technical professionals, that shift feels alien.

The transition is rarely smooth. Sales is dismissed as “sleazy,” soft skills as “unnecessary fluff,” and client management as a distraction from “real work.” Research on Big Four partner development found that only 2-3% of employees reach partner level, with commercial capability, not technical excellence, the primary differentiator (Carter and Spence, 2014). The cost of failed transitions is therefore borne not only by individuals stalled in mid-career, but by firms whose pyramid economics depend on producing commercially capable senior leaders.

This is not a skills deficit that can be fixed through standard training. It is an issue of professional identity. Technical experts construct their self-worth around objectivity, precision, and “knowing the answer”. The behaviours required of senior consultants (e.g. persuasion, emotional navigation, “selling the invisible”) threaten that identity, triggering avoidance, cynicism, and what practitioners call “technical paralysis” (Channel Futures, 2024).

This paper addresses a deceptively simple question: how do technical professionals transform into effective business developers? The argument advanced here is that technical consultants generally fail at business development not because they lack skills or motivation, but because business development threatens their professional identity: and that identity-based interventions tend to produce more durable and effective change than skills-based ones.

What Helps Leopards Change Their Spots?

What Doesn't Work

Traditional approaches to developing the commercial and relational capabilities required at director or partner level often underperform for technically trained employees. They are built on the assumption that the barrier is a skills, knowledge or motivation gap. The evidence suggests these approaches are, at best, weak levers when used in isolation and, at worst, can harden resistance.

Growth-mindset interventions, often deployed as a generic solution to confidence or capability beliefs, show very small average effects. A meta-analysis of 273 studies (N = 365,915) found an average intervention effect of $d = 0.08$, and 46% of interventions failed to shift mindset beliefs at all; even where beliefs shifted, downstream performance effects rarely followed (Sisk et al., 2018).

A second reason one-off training disappoints is limited transfer from classroom to client behaviour, particularly for interpersonal “open skills” such as relationship building, influencing and sales conversations. Transfer research shows only a minority of what is taught is expressed in day-to-day work, and the relationship

between training and behaviour weakens over time without reinforcement (Blume et al., 2010). This is made worse when programmes are designed without rigorous needs analysis. Leadership development evidence indicates that programmes that conducted thorough needs analysis showed transfer effects of $d = 3.51$ versus $d = 0.41$ when needs analysis was absent (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Generic content is not merely less efficient: it is qualitatively misaligned with the participant's real performance demands. For technical professionals, that misalignment is especially costly because it confirms the pre-existing suspicion that "this is fluffy" or "not how our clients buy".

Some commonly used approaches actively trigger pushback because they threaten autonomy and professional self-concept. Mandated sales training framed in compliance language can provoke psychological reactance, an oppositional response to perceived control, producing boomerang effects in which the message becomes less persuasive (Steindl et al., 2015). This helps explain why "sales bootcamps" are often rejected by engineers and other technical specialists, who experience "salesy" behaviour as inauthentic or morally compromised. The Festo "Fit for Change" case is illustrative: standard sales training failed because engineers rejected the content; a shift to embedded, manager-led coaching in real technical contexts was associated with improved commercial outcomes (Hawkins, 2013).

The deeper point is that resistance is not stubbornness; it is psychologically protective. Kegan and Lahey's "immunity to change" framework is useful here: people can be genuinely committed to promotion while simultaneously enacting hidden competing commitments that protect status, competence and belonging (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). Conventional interventions fail because they address the visible goal ("do more business development") without addressing the psychological immune system that makes avoidance feel necessary and rational.

Reading Effect Sizes

Table 1 below summarises evidence from interventions relevant to commercial development. Because the underlying studies use different metrics, a brief note on interpretation is helpful.

Cohen's d expresses the standardised difference between two group means in standard-deviation units. The conventional benchmarks are $d \approx 0.2$ (small), 0.5 (medium) and 0.8 (large); values above 1.0 are unusually large in social-science research. Hedges' g is essentially the same metric as d but adjusted for small samples, and is interpreted on the same scale. "ES" is used in some primary studies as a generic effect-size label; where original sources do not specify the variant, it is generally a Cohen's d or close equivalent. The Pearson correlation r expresses the strength of the linear association between two variables on a scale from -1 to $+1$; $r \approx 0.10$ is small, 0.30 is medium and 0.50 is large. As a rough conversion, an r of 0.30 corresponds to a d of around 0.63, and an r of 0.38 to a d of around 0.82. The values in Table 1 are reported in the metric used by the original authors to avoid the precision loss that conversion introduces.

Table 1: Efficacy of interventions relevant to commercial development

Intervention	Effect size	Interpretation
Training with needs analysis	$d = 3.51$	Very large / exceptional

Intervention	Effect size	Interpretation
Role-play / simulation	ES = 0.82	Large
Executive coaching (self-regulation)	g = 0.74	Large
Self-efficacy → work performance	r = .38	Large (correlation)
Autonomy-supportive management	d = 0.37–0.44	Medium
Training without needs analysis	d = 0.41	Small
Growth-mindset interventions	d = 0.08	Negligible

Note: $d/g \geq 0.8$ = large; $0.5–0.8$ = medium; $0.2–0.5$ = small; < 0.2 = negligible. $r \geq .30$ = large correlation. Source: Author's synthesis from cited studies (Sisk et al., 2018; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Taylor, Russ-Eft and Chan, 2005; Theeboom, Beersma and Van Vianen, 2014; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998; Hardré and Reeve, 2009).

Professional Identity and What Works in Career Shifts

A growing body of research suggests that some career transitions are not best understood as acquiring extra skills, but as becoming a different kind of professional (Ibarra, 2003; Ashforth, 2001). This distinction matters for the technical-to-director/partner shift in consultancies. In the early- and mid-career technical role, status and self-worth are typically earned through expertise, correctness, and delivery (“I am valuable because I know and can solve”). At director or partner level, value is earned through shaping demand, building trust with senior stakeholders, and mobilising other people’s expertise (“I am valuable because I can create outcomes through relationships and influence”) (Petriglieri, 2011). Professional services research reinforces that this is not a superficial difference: the senior role logic is structurally commercial, and progression depends heavily on converting social and cultural capital into economic capital (Carter and Spence, 2014; Spence, Carter and Muzio, 2015).

Through this lens, resistance to business development is not stubbornness or a skills deficit. It is identity-protective. When commercial work threatens competence (“I’ll look novice”) or integrity (“selling is sleazy”), avoidance becomes psychologically sensible: people retreat into delivery, over-prepare, hide behind detail, or reframe their discomfort as a principled moral stance (Petriglieri, 2011). This is consistent with classic role-exit and transition research: moving into a new role can involve leaving behind a valued identity, with discomfort, grief-like reactions and fear of humiliation as a novice (Bridges, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988). What looks like a training problem often has the structure of an identity problem: “Who am I if my technical certainty is no longer my primary value?”

How Identity Change Actually Happens

Identity research also gives a clearer view of how successful transitions happen. Ibarra’s working-identity perspective argues that when the next role requires a different self-concept, people do not get there through introspection or mindset affirmation. They get there by acting their way into a new identity: trying new behaviours, sampling new networks, and selectively adopting what works (Ibarra, 2003). Her earlier work on “provisional selves” makes the mechanism concrete: people “borrow” and test possible versions of themselves in real settings, then keep what fits and discard what does not (Ibarra, 1999). Identity change is public and iterative: the person learns whether the emerging self can hold in front of clients, partners, and peers.

This process often produces a liminal stage: an in-between state where someone is no longer fully anchored in the old identity but does not yet feel legitimate in the new one (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). Ibarra (2005) describes this as “neither here nor there,” and it predicts a characteristic pattern: people double down on what used to make them successful (precision, caution, technical depth) at exactly the moment the new role requires different moves (agenda-setting, ambiguity tolerance, asking for commitments). Liminal discomfort is not evidence that development has failed: it is often a feature of identity transition, especially when the new role violates old identity rules.

Narrative identity work explains why confidence and “feeling like yourself” tend to lag behind behaviour change. In major role transitions, people rewrite their self-story through repeated episodes of explanation and sensemaking, and the new identity becomes durable when those narratives are coherent and socially confirmed (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). For technical professionals, this helps explain the common pattern of “I understand the commercial models, but I still can’t bring myself to do it in real conversations”: the knowledge is present, but the lived story of “who I am at work” has not caught up.

What This Implies for Development Interventions

If career shifts are identity transitions, the practical question becomes: what kinds of intervention support identity reconstruction? Identity research points to a set of conditions that make experimentation possible, reduce identity threat, and increase the likelihood that new behaviours become part of a stable professional self.

Safe experiments and identity buffering

Because identity change follows action, effective interventions must create bounded, low-stakes opportunities to try commercially relevant behaviours before participants feel fully confident or legitimate. Ibarra (2005) describes the need for “identity buffering”: temporal, spatial and relational boundaries that protect immature versions of the self from harsh judgement while they develop. The implication is often missed in firms: if participants are expected to practise only in the most reputation-threatening settings (big pitches, senior buyers, must-win opportunities), they are being asked to reconstruct identity under threat. Reversion to the old identity is then likely. Simulation and role-play are not effective merely because they teach technique: they work because they provide a psychologically safer arena in which people can take reputational risks, receive feedback, and discover that they can do the behaviour without becoming inauthentic. Role-play is identity rehearsal, not just skill rehearsal (Taylor, Russ-Eft and Chan, 2005).

Holding environments and peer communities

The identity-workspace literature adds a further element: certain structured settings act as “holding environments” for identity work because they provide protection, community and legitimising rituals (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Evidence from mid-career transitions shows these spaces help people experiment with provisional selves and gradually consolidate a new identity (Haynes et al., 2014). This matters in consultancies because peer norms strongly police what sort of person it is acceptable to be. A well-designed programme can temporarily loosen those norms, allowing technical specialists to practise being more commercially directive without being treated as “trying to be a salesperson.”

Needs analysis as identity diagnosis

The identity lens reframes needs analysis. In conventional training logic, needs analysis is about relevance and efficiency. In identity-based change, the purpose is deeper: to identify which identity threat is driving avoidance. For some, the threat is moral (“selling is manipulation”); for others competence (“I will look stupid”); for others status (“I will lose credibility”); and for others belonging (“this isn’t what people like us do”). Treating these as one generic “sales skills gap” often intensifies resistance because it fails to name the real fear and may inadvertently threaten autonomy or integrity. This is one reason the leadership-development evidence on needs analysis is so important: it is repeatedly associated with much stronger behavioural transfer than generic programmes (Lacerenza et al., 2017).

Surfacing competing commitments

Kegan and Lahey’s immunity-to-change framework offers a closely aligned explanation for persistent resistance: people can be sincerely committed to a goal (“I want to become more commercial”) while simultaneously holding a competing commitment (“I must not risk looking incompetent or salesy”), maintained by a big assumption (“If I sell, I will lose credibility and belonging”) (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). The implication is that programmes need structured methods for surfacing these hidden commitments and testing assumptions through safe behavioural experiments, not simply more tools.

Mastery experiences and self-regulation

Identity change is fragile if it remains insight-only. What stabilises the new identity is evidence: “I did it; it worked; I stayed credible; I’m still me.” Self-efficacy theory provides the bridge: self-efficacy is strongly linked to performance, and the most powerful source of self-efficacy is mastery experience: graded success at the target behaviours (Bandura, 1977; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). For technical professionals this points to carefully sequenced mastery experiences in commercial behaviours (opening a conversation, asking implication or value questions, making a clean next-step ask), not motivational messages. Coaching is particularly relevant because the barrier is often self-regulation under threat: managing anxiety, resisting the pull back into technical detail, and tolerating ambiguity long enough to ask for commitment. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that coaching has meaningful effects and tends to move behaviour more reliably than attitudes (Theeboom, Beersma and Van Vianen, 2014; Nicolau et al., 2023).

Social granting of the new identity

Senior identities are socially constructed. In leadership-identity theory, individuals “claim” a leader identity through actions and language, and others “grant” it through recognition and followership (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). The director or partner commercial identity works the same way: it becomes real when managers and peers treat commercial behaviour as legitimate work, create opportunities to practise it, and reinforce attempts not only wins. Autonomy-supportive management matters here, because controlling, compliance-heavy messaging triggers reactance and hardens identity resistance, whereas autonomy support makes experimentation psychologically safer (Deci, Connell and Ryan, 1989; Hardré and Reeve, 2009; Steindl et al., 2015).

Taken together, identity research does more than explain why technical consultants resist business development: it indicates what interventions are likely to work. The common thread is that successful development is less about persuading people to

value soft skills and more about creating the conditions in which they can: (1) safely experiment with a new professional self; (2) accumulate mastery evidence that they can do the behaviours without losing credibility or integrity; and (3) receive social reinforcement that the emerging identity is legitimate. This logic directly informs the methodology that follows.

Methodology

Study Design

This study used a longitudinal, qualitative intervention design to examine how an identity-oriented development programme influenced commercial confidence and behaviour among technically trained consultants. The research was conducted across four consulting companies and followed 15 participants over six months, allowing analysis of change over time as well as comparison across organisational contexts. The author acted as practitioner-researcher and delivered the intervention, positioning the study within a pragmatic, applied tradition consistent with intervention research in organisational settings.

The intervention was designed in line with evidence regarding what works in identity-based change: (i) needs analysis before programme design (Lacerenza et al., 2017); (ii) practice-heavy role-plays (Taylor, Russ-Eft and Chan, 2005); (iii) training combined with coaching (Theeboom, Beersma and Van Vianen, 2014); (iv) deliberate focus on domain-specific mastery experiences (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998); (v) autonomy-supportive manager involvement (Hardré and Reeve, 2009); and (vi) spaced practice (Cepeda et al., 2006). The programme was framed as “Commercial Engineering” rather than “sales training”, explicitly reframing commercial activity as diagnostic problem-solving, consistent with identity-based transition theory (Ibarra, 2003) and investigative or insight-led selling models (Rackham, 1988; Dixon and Adamson, 2011).

Participants and Sampling

Fifteen technical consultants were drawn from four consulting companies. A purposive sampling strategy was used: participants met all of the following inclusion criteria:

- technically trained background (e.g., IT, engineering, data, technical delivery);
- working in client-facing delivery or management roles aiming to progress towards senior grades;
- recognised (by self-report and/or line manager) as needing to strengthen commercial confidence and behaviours;
- availability and organisational support to complete the intervention and interviews.

All participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms; company identities were anonymised (Companies A–D).

The Commercial Engineering Intervention

The programme comprised six training days delivered over 8-12 weeks, combining classroom-based inputs with repeated practice, field application, and coaching-oriented transfer support. The architecture was:

- Days 1-2: mindset work and skills transfer
- Days 3-4: deep practice (role-plays) and field experiments
- Days 5-6: ongoing coaching and support for line managers

Prior to delivery, the author conducted needs analysis within each company, including interviews with senior stakeholders and review of commercial artefacts (objections, win/loss notes, typical deal stages). This step operationalised the “needs analysis first” principle (Lacerenza et al., 2017), supported the creation of company-specific role-plays, and benchmarked individuals against 230 peers on mindset and commercial capabilities.

Training and coaching focused on identity work rather than sales frameworks. Content explicitly reframed commercial activity as problem-solving, growth and helping. A structured “Immunity to Change” exercise (Kegan and Lahey, 2009) was used to surface hidden competing commitments and big assumptions, followed by a reframing of the ethical and emotional responses uncovered. Practice followed a behaviour-first approach, graduating from role-plays of easy situations to more complex ones; line managers prepared graduated field opportunities; coaching reflected explicitly on identity, ethics and emotion rather than sales tools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews at three time points:

- *T1 (baseline)*: pre-intervention; identity narratives (“what makes me valuable”), beliefs about selling, prior experiences, current business development behaviour.
- *T2 (midpoint)*: approximately three months in (after the main training blocks and at least one field sprint); early practice experiences, confidence shifts, identity tension, behavioural experimentation.
- *T3 (endpoint)*: at six months; consolidation or relapse, perceived identity change, sustained behaviour, contextual enablers and barriers.

Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Interview guides used open questions and behavioural probes (e.g., “Tell me about your last client conversation where you asked for a next step, what did you do and how did it feel?”) to reduce reliance on abstract self-evaluation.

Analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019), with within-participant longitudinal coding across the three interviews and cross-case thematic analysis. Coding was informed abductively by identity-transition theory (Ibarra, 2003), Immunity to Change (Kegan and Lahey, 2009), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), and autonomy support (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Findings

The findings indicate a significant shift over time in participants’ attitudes and behaviours toward business development, with consistent supporting patterns across companies.

T1 (baseline): Identity-Protective Resistance

Participants described themselves first and foremost as technical specialists, including those already operating at senior grades. Technical work: designing solutions, fixing problems, delivery excellence, was consistently presented as the main source of pride and enjoyment (“being the person with the right answer”). Sales and relationship activity was framed as secondary, less legitimate, or outside their “real job.”

The baseline benchmarking survey supported this account. Participant scores were uniformly lower than the comparison group (partners and directors), but the gap was not evenly distributed: differences were more pronounced in softer commercial capabilities (persuasion, relationship building, comfort with sales conversations, making and progressing a next-step ask) than in sales knowledge (awareness of approaches, models and frameworks). In other words, the deficit was behavioural, not informational.

Resistance to business development was present at multiple levels rather than as a single attitude:

- Moral resistance: ethical or value-based language used to distance from selling (e.g., “manipulative,” “sleazy,” “inconsistent with integrity”).
- Status protection: discomfort at moving from a domain where they were experienced and respected into one where they felt novice; concern about “losing credibility.”
- Emotional resistance: anxiety about initiating contact, asking for meetings, progressing a sale, or naming commercial next steps.

T2 (midpoint): Liminal Experimentation

By T2, participants were beginning to challenge fundamental assumptions about selling. A notable driver was client voice: hearing clients describe the sales process as a necessary part of getting interventions “right” challenged the moral story that selling is inherently manipulative. This matters because at T1 moral resistance often operated as a tidy justification for avoidance (“I’m not avoiding because I’m anxious; I’m avoiding because it’s sleazy”). By T2 the moral distancing had begun to weaken because the ethical frame of commercial work had shifted. The question moved from “Is selling beneath me?” to “Is it professional to withhold a helpful diagnosis?”

The language at T2 strongly suggests participants were in the messy middle of an identity transition rather than simply acquiring new skills. Words such as “uncomfortable,” “uncertain,” “experimenting” and “curious” recurred, reflecting a liminal phase in which participants were trying out new behaviours but reported anxiety and awkwardness.

Identity integration was incomplete and fragile. Several participants described tension between delivery identity and commercial identity, and reported that the impulse to retreat into technical certainty was strongest when stakes rose: senior client audiences, ambiguity, or the prospect of rejection.

T3 (endpoint): Consolidation and Integration

At T3, the most striking change was that for a substantial proportion of participants the idea of being “commercial” had become less alien and less identity-threatening. They no longer described commercial behaviour as “being salesy”, they described it as part of being a responsible consultant.

Three patterns stood out. First, internalisation of the diagnostic and helping frame: many participants used language closer to “diagnosing,” “making sense of the situation,” “helping them decide,” or “protecting the client from the consequences of not acting.” Withholding a helpful diagnosis began to feel less ethical than raising it. Second, a broadened identity: technical credibility remained central but was no longer the only source of value. As one consultant put it: “I’m not less technical. I’m just... more complete. I can do the technical diagnosis and I can lead what happens next.” Third, confidence had grown in specific behaviours:

- opening a client conversation without rushing into the solution;
- asking implication and value questions;
- making a clear next-step ask;
- handling objections without collapsing into defensiveness or over-explaining.

Sustained change was, however, uneven and context-dependent. Where participants had supportive line managers and real opportunities to practise, behaviours were more likely to hold (Table 2). Where participants returned to environments dominated by delivery pressure and short-term utilisation, many described drift back into technical comfort zones. As one participant noted: “When delivery went mad, I stopped reaching out. I felt I was the person that should fix it.”

Table 2: Behaviour tracking across 15 participants (months 1, 3 and 6)

Participant	Mgr support	Practice opp.	Delivery pressure	M1 BD convs	M1 next-step asks	M1 network convs	M3 BD convs	M3 next-step asks	M6 BD convs	M6 next-step asks	Pattern
P1	High	High	Low	4	3	2	6	5	7	6	Sustained + compounding
P2	High	Medium	Medium	3	2	2	4	3	4	3	Sustained
P3	Medium	High	Medium	3	2	1	4	3	5	4	Gradual build
P4	Medium	Medium	High	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	Drift
P5	Low	High	High	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	Drop-off
P6	Low	Low	High	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	Reversion
P7	High	Low	Medium	2	1	1	2	1	3	2	Slow progress
P8	Medium	High	Low	4	3	2	5	4	6	5	Sustained + compounding
P9	High	High	Medium	3	2	2	5	4	6	5	Sustained + compounding
P10	High	Medium	High	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	Plateau → drift
P11	Medium	Low	Medium	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	Stable but limited
P12	High	Medium	Low	3	2	1	4	3	5	4	Steady build
P13	Low	Medium	High	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	Drift + drop-off
P14	Medium	High	High	3	2	1	3	2	2	1	Mixed / fragile
P15	High	Medium	Medium	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	Growth then relapse

Table 3: The journey of three (anonymised) participants

Consultant profile	T1 (baseline)	T2 (midpoint)	T3 (endpoint)
Sam (IT / Cloud & Data Platform)	"No idea why you'd get someone who is good at something and ask them to do something they're not good at." "I'm valuable because I can usually find the answer... 'sales' feels like going somewhere I might not know and being judged."	"I can solve problems really well. If a sale comes from helping solve a problem, then I guess that's a win." "When I treat it like diagnosis - debugging the business - I can do it. If I call it 'selling,' my brain shuts down."	"Humans are more complicated than code, but it's kind of a code. One that you need to practise to perfect." "I still build solutions, but now I'm also someone who creates work through conversations. It doesn't feel like 'sales', it feels like shaping the right work."
Priya (Engineering / Manufacturing)	"Sales feels morally 'off,' manipulative, or like a performance rather than genuine engineering." "I didn't go into engineering to persuade people... you either need it or you don't."	"I get the argument that it's a professional duty. Sometimes [clients] don't know what to do." "I thought asking would feel manipulative. It didn't. It felt like being useful on purpose."	"I liked the medical metaphor: a physio who starts working on you without diagnosis is not a good physio." "I don't think of it as selling. It's leading a proper diagnostic conversation, then agreeing the next step. That actually feels more ethical."
Lena (Pharma / Validation & Compliance)	"There's an honesty thing, I don't want to promise things that aren't true." "In my world you don't say things unless you can back them up... sales feels like confidence without evidence."	"It's uncomfortable. But it reminded me of when I started uni, that was uncomfortable too." "I did a small ask and my heart was going... but it didn't feel sleazy. It felt responsible."	"I've learned it's okay to embrace uncertainty, you can talk about what's likely rather than what will happen." "I can say, 'I don't know yet, but here's what we'd test,' and I'm still credible. That's the change."

Analysis

This study set out to explore how technically trained consultants can develop into confident business developers. The findings suggest meaningful change is possible, but is best understood as an identity transition supported by repeated behavioural practice rather than as a transfer of sales skills. At baseline, participants already understood many sales ideas in theory; their survey gap was larger on interpersonal and behavioural elements than on sales know-how, yet they still resisted the activities that create revenue: initiating conversations, tolerating ambiguity, asking for commitments. The obstacle is not mainly knowledge but the psychological and ethical meaning participants attach to selling: for many, it threatens both their competence-based identity ("I am valuable because I know") and their moral identity ("I am professional because I don't manipulate people").

A useful way to read the T1→T2→T3 pattern is as a movement through three stages: identity threat, liminal experimentation, and partial identity integration. At T1, resistance was multilayered and identity-protective: moral objections, status protection, and emotional avoidance. By T2, many participants had entered a liminal state, using language such as "uncomfortable," "uncertain," "experimenting" and "curious." This is not failure; it is consistent with identity transition theory: when people are moving from a familiar expert self to an emerging advisor or business-developer self, the mid-phase is characteristically awkward and provisional because

the new identity is not yet stable or socially confirmed. The first meaningful movement was not learning sales scripts but changing the moral and professional frame of commercial work: selling began to be described less as persuasion and more as diagnosis and duty of care.

This matters because it directly attacks the moral barrier. If selling is reinterpreted as part of responsible consulting, avoidance becomes harder to justify as ethics and can be seen more honestly as fear or uncertainty that can be worked with.

At T3, the strongest evidence of progress was the emergence of integrated identity language: several participants no longer described commercial behaviour as “being salesy” but as part of being a responsible consultant, while still retaining their technical identity. The quote “I’m not less technical. I’m just... more complete. I can do the technical diagnosis and I can lead what happens next” captures this clearly. This is a classic signature of identity reconstruction: the new role is not experienced as abandoning the old self, but as expanding it. The three journey vignettes reinforce the point. Sam shifts from fearing judgement in ambiguous conversations to seeing commercial conversations as “debugging the business”; Priya shifts from moral discomfort to a physio-diagnosis metaphor that keeps selling inside an ethical frame; Lena shifts from needing absolute certainty to tolerating uncertainty while remaining credible. These are not descriptions of new skills: they are revised answers to “Who am I at work, and what is my professional duty?”

The behaviour tracking table provides a second, more operational lens. Commercial behaviour did increase and, for some, became self-sustaining. But change was not uniform: there were cases of drift, drop-off and relapse. This unevenness is analytically valuable because it points to a central boundary condition: identity change requires not only internal shifts, but external conditions that allow the new identity to be enacted repeatedly. Sustained change was more likely where participants had supportive managers and real opportunities to practise; less likely under delivery pressure and short-term utilisation, where people drifted back into technical comfort zones. The relapse quote illustrates the underlying mechanism: when pressure rises, people revert to the safest identity (expert/doer mode) even if they intellectually know what commercial behaviour looks like. The limiting factor is not memory of a technique; it is which identity feels safest and most rewarded in the moment.

Pulling these threads together suggests a practical model for what happened in the strongest cases:

- *Ethical reframing reduces identity threat*: selling becomes part of professional care and good diagnosis.
- *Safe practice makes action possible before confidence exists*: role-play and early client experiments.
- *Small wins create evidence-based confidence*: self-efficacy grows from mastery experiences, not motivation alone.
- *Social reinforcement consolidates identity*: manager support and opportunity signal that the commercial-consultant identity is legitimate.
- *Without reinforcement, the old identity reasserts under stress*: drift and relapse when delivery pressure dominates.

This model also helps explain why skills-first interventions disappoint for this population. If the person still experiences selling as morally compromised or identity-damaging, they may attend training, learn the models, even agree with the content, and still avoid performing the behaviours when it matters.

Limitations

The study is qualitative and intervention-based, delivered by the author, with interview data collected at three time points over six months. This is strong for understanding how people experience change, but limits causal certainty: without a control group or independent outcome measurement, it is difficult to attribute change to any single component (role-play vs coaching vs manager support). The behaviour-tracking data also makes clear that context can dominate capability. Future work should test the design against a controlled comparator and complement self-report with revenue or pipeline outcomes.

Conclusion: Implications for Firms

Technical consultants generally fail at business development not because they lack skills or motivation, but because business development threatens their professional identity. Identity-based interventions, which combine ethical reframing, safe behavioural experiments, mastery-graded practice and managerial reinforcement, produce more durable change than skills-first programmes. The evidence here is qualitative and intervention-based, but it is consistent with a wider literature on identity transitions, training transfer and self-efficacy.

For managing partners, three implications are particularly direct. First, the firm's commercial pyramid is at risk if the path from technical specialist to senior business developer is treated as a training problem. Where it is, the typical outcome is high training spend, low behavioural change, and a quiet attrition of the very people the firm needs to convert into directors and partners. Second, the boundary condition matters. Even well-designed interventions will not stick in environments dominated by short-term utilisation pressure and delivery firefighting. Capacity protection (deliberate space for participants to practise commercial behaviours in real client situations) is part of the intervention, not a peripheral concern. Third, the moral frame is decisive. Programmes branded as "sales training" will continue to provoke reactance among technical specialists. Reframing the activity as diagnostic responsibility, duty of care and professional helping is not cosmetic; it neutralises the most stubborn source of resistance.

For learning and development functions, the practical design choices follow. Begin with needs analysis as identity diagnosis, not topic selection: which threat is driving avoidance: moral, competence, status, or belonging? Build company-specific role-plays so practice happens in an arena that participants recognise as real. Sequence mastery experiences from easy to hard, deliberately producing early small wins. Pair training with coaching that reflects on identity, ethics and emotion rather than rehearsing tools. Plan for the liminal phase: discomfort and awkwardness mid-programme are signals that identity work is happening, not that the programme is failing.

For line managers, the role is more consequential than is usually recognised. Identity is socially granted, not privately decided. Managers grant the new identity by treating

commercial behaviour as legitimate work, by creating real opportunities to practise, and by reinforcing attempts, not only wins. They withhold it, often unintentionally, when they reward only delivery, when commercial activity is described as “overhead,” or when participants are told to “go and sell” in the most reputation-threatening settings. Autonomy-supportive management, brief coaching conversations after live attempts, and visible permission to make small commercial mistakes are simple, low-cost moves that meaningfully change the odds.

The broader implication for the profession is straightforward. The technical-to-commercial transition has been treated as a skills problem for too long, and the disappointing return on investment in conventional sales training reflects that misdiagnosis. Treat it as an identity problem, design accordingly, and create the organisational conditions in which the new identity can be enacted and rewarded, and leopards do, in fact, change their spots.

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