JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

Practitioner's Corner

Are You Really Listening? Delivering What Your Client Really Wants and Needs

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Often, the solution to a new assignment is derived instinctually from preformed ideas on the nature of the problem and its solution. While consultants are supposedly hired for their knowledge and skills, it is also true that some consultants begin an assignment with a solution in mind. This is long before the problem has been fully examined. These preformed or ready-made solutions create at least two problems. First, they inhibit creativity; and, second, they do not truly address the issue. A one-size problem does not fit all. The greatest skills a consultant can possess are the abilities to approach a job with an open mind, to assemble and decipher appropriate clues, and to actively listen and hear what the client really needs and wants.

An open mind entails approaching an assignment without bias. The system you selected for your last assignment may not be the perfect solution for this one. Be open to other approaches and solutions. Do not pick a solution because it is safe; choose one because you have fully studied the problem, collected all pertinent data, interviewed a cross section of key parties, and considered a number of alternative approaches. Consulting without bias requires that you set aside your ego, expectations, and prejudices and really hear what your client is asking. So, how do you hear your clients' needs? You hear your clients' needs by communicating with them early, continually, and frequently. Communication should be initiated in the earliest stages of planning and continued throughout the duration of the project. The consultant forges a clear understanding of problems, and users have a clear understanding of what the solution will achieve (Davis, 1989).

A few years ago, I worked for a nonprofit organization where it was decided to automate the data collected from clients. We hoped to be able to use this information to generate statistics and data that we could then present to government and private organizations for fundraising purposes. We met with several consultants to discuss our needs and to gather expert opinion on the best system to meet our needs. It has been a few years, but I can clearly remember one particular consultant who came in making all sorts of promises to increase our fundraising capacity with the installation of his "wonder" system which he could have up and running in all

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 1 Iss. 2, 2007, pp. 37-39

ISSN 1930-806X

of our offices in a matter of 3 to 6 months. It sounded good, almost too good. We decided to hire him to work his promised magic.

During the assessment and solution designing stages, he gathered the documents from the manual process. He conducted countless interviews, created fancy data flow charts, and participated in our technology committee meetings. There was note taking, document gathering, and nodding in agreement. In the end, the project was delivered with a great deal of fanfare but with little substance and little ability to fulfill our needs. What we discovered later was that he had delivered to us almost an exact copy of the system he had delivered to another nonprofit organization in a prior assignment. The problem here was that the only things the two organizations had in common were that they were both nonprofits and that they both needed to do fundraising (show me a nonprofit agency that does not have this very basic need). The system worked quite well for the first group but was woefully inadequate for ours. The hours of planning, note taking, document gathering, and interviewing were wasted; the consultant came to us with a solution before he ever heard our problem. Bias, ignorance, and the inability to listen resulted in an abandoned project. Fortunately for us, the new consultant we hired was truly skilled at listening to his clients.

Recently, a good friend of mine consulted with a career counselor because she had reached a point in her professional life where she felt she could benefit from the wisdom of an expert in the field because she was interested in switching careers. She had not received career counseling in many years but remembered enough to have an idea of what to expect during the data collection phase. She expected to take a variety of tests such as the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory or other tests designed to determine her areas of interest and aptitude. She also expected to have at least one fairly in-depth interview during which she would be asked a variety of questions. Finally, she expected to have a wrap-up session where she would receive an oral and written report with the consultant’s career path recommendation. In reality, no tests were taken, and the interview process was lacking as well. There was little depth, little information gathering (listening), and lots of speech making by the consultant. In fact, there were several times during the interview process when the counselor interrupted her client’s responses to either move onto the next question or to interject her own story into the conversation. The final report was not based on even the minimum information that was gathered; it seemed to be based on a one-size-fits-all prewritten report that the career counselor had probably given to many if not all of her clients. It did not reflect my friend’s interests, education, or aptitude. It is obvious that the consultant’s ability to listen to her client was extremely deficient; it is less clear whether incompetence, fraud, or bias were also problems.

In both examples, we can see how ineffective listening skills caused the projects to fail. How do you ensure that you are truly hearing what your clients want? The answer is simple and yet quite complex: you hear them by listening and hearing what the client has to say without projecting your own feelings or ideas. There are two primary methods for effective listening: reflective and active listening. Reflective listening is perhaps most appropriate in a counseling communication exchange because it focuses on listening and reflecting empathy back to the subject. On the other hand, active listening is appropriate in all communication exchanges because it focuses on truly hearing and listening to the speaker and provides the tools that can help anyone improve their listening skills. What is active listening, and how do you use it? Active listening requires that you remain focused on the conversation (Fogarty & Perkins, 2005). You fully listen to the speaker, giving your complete attention. Catching yourself when your mind starts to wander to other topics or even when you stop listening to start preparing responses

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 1 Iss. 2, 2007, pp. 38-40

ISSN 1930-806X

is important. Parroting the key items back to the client to ensure you are fully grasping the important factors can help. Ask probing questions (why, how, when) to further engage the speaker, encouraging further dialogue and expansion on unclear or incomplete areas. Listen with your entire body; by making eye contact, facing the speaker, and sitting erect with minimal fidgeting. Take queues from the body language of the speaker to hear the hidden messages. Is he or she exhibiting signs of anxiety by fidgeting or speaking too softly or quickly? Listening and watching for these clues will allow you to respond with feedback that can help calm the speaker and encourage the flow of dialogue.

So, how do you actively listen and take notes at the same time? How do you focus all your attention to hearing what the client is saying and not thinking ahead to the follow-up questions or any preliminary suggestions you might have? The answer is simple: you do not. While the speaker is speaking; jot down the key phrases or words and let them go, returning to the active conversation. Resist the urge to start planning and answering and focus on drawing the speaker out even further with your probing questions. When pauses in the conversation naturally occur, ask for a few moments to jot down some notes and then resume with follow-up questions or feedback to the earlier answers to allow for further elaboration or to show that you understand the point the speaker was making (confirmation that you have mutual understanding). Conclude the meeting with a summary of what you have learned from the speaker, this will provide an opportunity for correction, clarification, and further note taking. Once you have left the client, this is the time to fully flush out the details of your notes. It is important to do this while the details are still fresh in your memory, so take care of this as soon as possible.

Now that you have all of this great information, what do you do with it? Read it, digest it, and use it to develop and implement solutions that deliver exactly what the client wants and needs. A successful project is not simply one you are able to complete, but one that is actually implemented and used by the client. By incorporating active listening in all of your exchanges; you will increase communication, understanding, and satisfaction and see an improvement in your consulting relationships.

About the Author

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Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 1 Iss. 2, 2007, pp. 37-39

ISSN 1930-806X