

Are You Guessing or Do You Really Know? Why companies need to dig deeper when engaging with consultants

BY DOUG MCKINLEY,
PSY.D.



Dr. Doug McKinley

I remember my 7th grade history teacher. He noticed something about me that compelled him to lean into me a bit. When he asked our history class questions, he noticed I was willing to assert my reply even though I didn't really know the answer. He applauded my willingness to risk answering, but warned me of the costs of guessing, rather than doing the harder work of knowing. I became a fan of his class because he led me to really search for knowledge rather than rely on hunches. This experience caused a turning point in my approach to learning, which ended up being invaluable as I pursued higher education to earn a doctorate degree.

Currently as a consultant, I notice the same thing happening between client and consultant. A whole lot of guessing is going on. Each party seems to think they know the answer to a problem or situation at hand, but are they being honest and do they really know? Or, are they willing to risk and proceed on a hunch, like I did in 7th grade? It is so tempting to not ask the hard questions in order to avoid embarrassing or insulting someone. The unfortunate outcome is often dissatisfaction among all parties involved.

A few years ago, a client of mine experienced the guessing verses knowing with a potential new partner. The first couple of meetings between them went well so they put together a proposal for a joint venture

and jumped right into collaboration. Both parties felt confident in knowing the aspirations of each company. They began working on a big project and over the course of a few short months, it became evident that each party was not aligned on business ideologies and financial matters. In a major meeting to discuss the ongoing venture, my client's partner abruptly called it off. My client was shocked at the development until I

helped him realize he had violated the principle of no guessing. He missed doing the hard work of finding out and knowing the current state of each company. His excitement at the possibilities pre-empted the deeper digging he needed to do to assure success. Consequently, each party found themselves in a lose-lose scenario that could have easily been a win-win for everyone involved had more energy gone into knowing instead of guessing or assuming.

Both organizations and consultants need to stop the guessing game. I have used outside consultants for both my companies over the years. On a few occasions after the engagement was over, I have been left confused asking, "what did I just miss?" I also provide a wide range of consulting services to organizations and will confess that at times I have guessed at what clients want in order to demonstrate competency, experience, and credibility. I have learned this approach is just not effective. Both sides must ask the hard questions and do the work necessary to bring about positive and

beneficial outcomes.

In his suburb book, *Get Real or Let's not Play*, Mahan Khalsa has determined that guessing is happening in almost epidemic proportions. He sites the act of guessing as causing seven figure mistakes with some of the best and brightest in the business world.

Here are my recommendations to organizations pursuing assistance from consultants:

1. Get Clear: if you are not sure what you need, either hire the consultant to help you get clarity or take the necessary time to find out exactly what you need before engaging consultants. The worst thing you can do is assume the consultant knows what you need, they don't.

2. Get Information: take the time to gather information about the firm you seek to engage. Get to know how they work and what values they hold. Ask questions about how they handle resistance and unexpected changes in the plan.

3. Get References: this is very important. Ask for relevant work references and CALL THEM. The best way to know if you are going to get what you need is to find out if similar organizations are happy with the consultant's work.

Consultants can be extremely helpful in meeting your company's objectives and goals. Take the necessary steps to create a positive engagement and outcome. I encourage you to stop guessing and start knowing.

Dr. Doug McKinley, CEO and President, The McKinley Group, can be reached at (630) 983-2861 or dmckinley@tmgleader.com or visit www.tmgleader.com.