How professional is professional advice ?

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When organisations bring in professional services firms to work in their company, they typically do it for more than just a single reason. For some, it is almost a sign of progress, of might and has a certain cachet associated with it. Notably, this is because professional advice does not come cheap, and to admit to enlisting external help especially when referring to some of the world's top 10 or 20 advisory firms, informs everyone that you have available capital to outlay on making your organisation better. Other reasons why consultants and their ilk are brought in, are more serious and are typically to be found as a result of either a lack of financial fecundity, organisational ineptitude, confusion, rapid change (due to a changing product, market or master) or understanding about where the company is heading.

A case in point, is to look a particular aspect of "getting what you want" that seems to provide answers to succeed in those areas listed above : working with consulting partners and professional advisory firms. it has been my fortunate and unfortunate experience over time, to witness and be involved with companies as well as individuals, who want to get what they want from what they currently have, sometimes at any cost. This can be seen to be exemplified by terms such as "jumping on the bandwagon" or "taking the lion's share of the market". This can be as simple (sic) as increasing profit, earnings-per-share, improved financial accounting, billing and / or inventory control, brand leadership or that nirvana of empowerment, a happy and motivated workforce. But individuals and companies rarely do get what they want, and more significantly, often get what they deserve.

But what is typical of many consulting engagements from both the adivisor and advisee viewpoints, is the manner in which each party feels they may not have achieved what they set out to do together.

So why can't everybody get what they want? Quite simply, companies do not have the luxury of time to understand what is best for them to do, under a particular set of circumstances. Furthermore, they do not know when to stop or change their circumstances, and more importantly realise when they are doing something wrong. Companies can't get what they want, because of these two aspects and when consultants are brought into the mix, this makes this goal even more unattainable. Whilst there has been much written on this subject by parties on both sides, and noting events which transpired at companies such as Sears Roebuck, Figgie International and more notably Enron, I would like to revisit some essential do's and dont's and provide some solutions to this conundrum.

First of all, there must be a definite clarity of purpose behind the need to bring in external consultants. Is this need dictated by internal or external influences ? Will this need be met once the job in hand is completed? Who else is using consultants on their projects? Do consulting firms make any difference to the organization? Or even, will it make the governing directors of the company feel better about the decisions they are about to take ? More often than not, and certainly in the case where organizations are run by multi-layered boards who report to each other (without mentioning any names of course), this is often the case. The emotional aspect of the "buy-in", and the recognition of the "synergy" to use but two of the consultants' favourite terms, cannot be ignored.

Once this crucial level of socio-psychological assessment has been met, organizing and co-ordinating the rest of the workforce to be involved with such an endeavour is crucial to any proposed success. Peers, colleagues and subordinates need to know the details, as far as is possible, as what any consulting project involves and what their role will be in order to facilitate it. A significant aspect of any such communication and discourse with the rest of the company, should also broach the subjects of time, money and effort that will be involved. I remember one notable consulting engagement that I once worked on, where for an electronics company, both the skilled electronic engineers and the management both cried in unison : "We don't mind what you are going to do to our company – just tell us how long its going to take and how much pain you are going to subject us to!".

In answering this question, the programme manager I was working with at the time, had to stop and think – literally. What were we to tell the workers – the full details of the both the business and IT change programmes, or just the expected outcome of our joint efforts (particularly since the company was very close to not existing any more at the time, owing to a previous unsuccessful change programme)? Were the senior management going to endorse our approach if we did this, and if not, how would we be able to take others "on the journey" to project success with us? The solution to this

issue, leads me to cite another aspect of professional firm behaviour which should be observed: keeping things simple.

In this particular example, we eventually decided to lay the full details of our remit, pain, effort and costs on the table. The last component of which came as a breath of fresh air for the company in question, as they had experienced a nasty surprise when the bill arrived for the previous group of consultants that had visited them. All of which, leads to the final aspect of any consulting project, which is consistent communication and evaluation of the project.

Many, if not all, of the major consulting organizations throughout the world, employ individuals highly skilled in the presentation and communication of a project's "message". What is sometimes difficult to ascertain, is how effective such individuals are at communicating risks and issues at an early enough stage within the project process, for remedial action to be taken. A particular team of software engineers from a large multinational software house (who shall remain nameless), were flown in to implement certain modules of an enterprise solution, for a client I was working with. This team, was technically and also professionally very good, and definitely knew their stuff and were highly adept at tracking progress and delivering what they had to deliver. What they tended to do however, was to communicate risks to the project as they stumbled upon them - whether in terms of technical issues with the software they were implementing, or process issues relating to the business users they were dealing with. This left the client, the vendor and ourselves in a strange predicament on our weekly update meetings: we never quite knew if the consulting team knew how important the risks and issues they faced, were to the client. Being a highly technical team, issues such as knowing the implications of configuring each module accurately, tended to be dismissed as process, rather than technical issues, which could be solved at a later date once the core system was implemented. What we didn't know, and what the client later found out, was that the configuration of the enterprise system, was perfectly suited to the narrow set of business processes the vendor knew about, but were so busy implementing the modules, that they did not highlight the risk of spending further effort in implementing the *right* process. This inevitably led to a large amount of head scratching and furrowed brows after the vendor consultants had left, as the implemented system, in its pristine glory, had failed to address the core business requirement of productivity increase.

Which brings me to my another point – perpetual evaluation of the relationship with the consulting team. In the latter example, some managers from the client had reservations about the manner and the speed by which the vendor consultants were carrying out their task – it was just too good to be true. However, they did not communicate these fears and feedback these concerns to the consulting team directly until it was too late, and the team had gone. Although the working relationship between both parties was very amicable, it was later found that at many an occasion, core risks and issues about meeting the requirements of the business through the implementation of the software, were not discussed for fear of ruining the relationship

somehow. This was a misplaced fear, quite obviously, but one that the client had to pay a heavy price for. Had the client taken the time to be as honest with themselves as they should have been with their charges, the outcome may well have been very different (and a lot cheaper in the long run…).

In conclusion then, we can always ask the question: what went wrong with the consulting effort at these companies, and why couldnt they get what they wanted (even though they were largely masters of their own destiny)? Nothing really. Everything was quite right for the most part: the vision, the buy-in, the effort, the communications initiative. But only for a certain time and at a certain place. And this is the final point to be observed, when dealing with consulting and other professional service firms. Matching all the work and effort carried out, to the original specifications is a difficult task, as much can change in the time between thinking about hiring, employing and completing a consultant-led project. In this case, it is a good idea to have some method of capturing the expectations and needs of aspects of the project as it proceeds, and comparing these drivers with the final outcome. In this way, a more accurate assessment of the success or failure of a project can be carried out, as the changing context of the project is brought into play.

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