

## This Is The Answer... What Was The Question?

### Latest Thinking Article



Senior Managers and Executives in both the public and private sectors sometimes tell disturbing stories of past dealings with consultancies (large and small) where results have been somewhat different to those anticipated.

#### **Why do expectations sometimes not match results... and who's to blame?**

Given that the business exercises due diligence in selecting a 'fit for purpose' consultancy, and there *is* a great deal of variation in the interpretation of 'due diligence', it seems that poor results can often be traced back to misunderstandings, misconceptions and misrepresentations seeded at initial client stakeholder meetings.

Getting to the bottom of where things started to go wrong can be a difficult process in itself which, when done in hindsight often throws up a number of blindingly obvious questions, which if properly addressed at the outset would have been critical in uncovering the key operational issues and developing a way forward.

#### **Did both parties ask searching questions?**

Asking searching questions starts with challenging assumptions on both sides. If assumptions are not checked at this early stage, we can't be good at

asking searching questions. Consultants and clients alike sometimes fail to validate assumptions and go straight on to ask well practised 'killer' questions. They may then rush headlong towards an 'off the shelf' solution based on an incomplete understanding of the problem and perhaps, past experience of a 'similar situation' in another business. Adopting this 'one size fits all' approach makes jumping to the wrong conclusions almost inevitable and a positive, timely and cost effective outcome much less likely.

Even more alarmingly, clients sometimes adopt a passive role inviting consultants by default to prescribe solutions without asking *any* questions of real substance, relying instead on the consultant's ability to fill in the gaps.

#### **Were questions asked of the right people?**

Having checked assumptions and asked the right questions, there has to be certainty on both sides that questions are directed to the right person or persons. Incorrect or inaccurate information given in good faith by people who *think* they know what the answer is (or *should* be) can result in costly delays and poor outcomes.

#### **Did both parties listen to the answers?**

Since most people find it difficult to talk (or start to contemplate their next question) and listen at the same time, it's best to listen carefully to what other people are saying. An obvious point I'm sure you will agree but we tend to be uncomfortable with pauses in the discussion to absorb, understand and fully appreciate what has been said and if necessary, write it down.

#### **Was there a common understanding and agreement?**

Different stakeholders within the client operation will probably have different ideas about what the key issues are and what should be done to facilitate a satisfactory solution. Every stakeholder will defend its own interests, and try to maximise its own potential

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gains. In fact, conflict between the different interests and stakeholder groups is normal.

The objective of the partnership between client and consultancy should not be to satisfy completely each stakeholder, nor should it be to “take sides” with one stakeholder against another. Rather, it should be to identify objectives that all stakeholders can agree on: a “platform” which they can all share and gain consensus on the methodology for achieving their common objectives.

Where there is no shared ‘platform’ based on understanding and agreement at the outset of the engagement, there can be no satisfactory outcome!

**Were the foundations for a dynamic communications process laid at the outset of the engagement?**

Statistics show that over seventy percent of project engagements are unsuccessful. One of the many factors that contribute to their failure during mid life is poor or insufficient ongoing communication between client and consultant.

Careful communication planning and setting the right expectations with stakeholders, managers and staff is extremely important if the client is to remain fully engaged with both the aims and objectives of the project and the consulting team.

In conclusion and not surprisingly, there is a clear relationship between the effective exchange of information and opinions during early client / consultant meetings and a satisfactory outcome for both parties. There can never be any cast iron guarantee of ‘success’ for any engagement but clients and consultants *can* work more closely together in creating solid project foundations to significantly reduce the chances of a poor outcome.

### About Linea

Linea is a results focused organisational excellence consultancy with a track record of delivering sustained superior performance that meets and where possible exceeds client expectations.

We combine the credentials of a top tier firm with the depth of expertise and flexibility of a niche practice to support clients in addressing their most pressing organisational issues through the provision of highly professional, innovative, customer focussed solutions which deliver expected business benefits on time every time.

With an exceptional track record of delivering multi-million pound savings for prominent Public and Private Sector clients, our Organisational Excellence approach provides the skills and capability required to support clients to maximise efficiency, improve quality and reduce cost.