

Taking Advice

You are a consultant: your role is to give advice, so asking for it yourself should come easily - but does it?

Simone is in the middle of a project, and her client has just asked her a casual question, to which she gives an equally casual answer. Driving home that evening, she thinks over the interchange again, and realises that she should not have answered so casually. The answer might have been right, or it might not. She worries about it for a while, and then dismisses it. It will be fine, no need to check. It is obvious that this story has an unhappy ending, and Simone ended up paying for expensive legal advice, when things went badly wrong.

With the benefit of hindsight, she can see that she could easily have checked up on what she said. She has a good friend, who is an expert in that field, and a quick phone call would have told her all she needed to know. It would have meant going back to the client and confessing that she had made a mistake, but if she had done it promptly, nothing would have been lost, except a little face.

So why did she not obtain that advice? Having asked herself that question many times, she reached the following conclusions:

1. She is paid to be the expert, so she is in the habit of delivering expertise.
2. She did not want to have to say she was wrong.
3. She was pretty sure she was right, so did not feel a strong need to check.
4. She tends to think, "it will be all right on the night", and can therefore leave things to chance.
5. She did not get as far as thinking about who to ask. If she had, since it was a good friend, she would almost certainly have phoned him up.

This last item is really important. Simone did not bother to draw up a list of sources. If she had, and had drawn a blank, or only had one expensive option, then her failure to take advice would be more understandable, though not more excusable. As it was, the advice was sitting almost at her fingertips, free of charge, but she did not even look for it.

Some people believe that to ask for advice is a sign of weakness, but in fact it is a sign of strength. It shows that you are secure and confident enough to say to someone: "I don't know about this, can you help me?" You are an expert in your field, but you cannot be expected to be an expert in everything. Recognising this is vital, because, as Simone discovered, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Asking in advance, rather than after the event, also shows that you are in control. Taking legal advice before you negotiate a complex contract is a much better idea than taking legal advice when the project goes wrong.

Who you ask is obviously important, and it will not normally be your client! As a consultant you need one or two people, who may be peers, friends or colleagues in other businesses, who you can use as sounding boards, and you will do the same for them.

Like Simone, Terry gave his client some advice “on the hoof”, and now he’s not so sure. Unlike Simone, he rings his colleague Gordon. Gordon is not an expert on this subject either, but Terry just wants to talk it through and see what Gordon thinks.

Gordon asks, “What are the consequences if you’re wrong, Terry?”

“Well, we’d probably waste some time on the project, but it would soon become obvious if it doesn’t work.”

“And what would the client think of you then?”

Terry goes quiet, and then says, “I need to check this out, Gordon. Any ideas who I could ask?”

They discuss names of people they know who might give a free opinion, but in the end, Terry decides he needs to pay for professional advice. “Now you’ve made me think about the consequences, it’s worth it, Gordon. Many thanks.”

Thinking about consequences is a good place to start, and that applies to your own business / career too, not just to work for clients.

If you are an employee, what help or advice could you get to help you on your career path, or to get the type of work that really interests you?

If you are self employed, who can advise you about your business, whether it is structured to minimise your tax payments, or optimise your cash flow?

In either case it is so easy just to stay busy being a consultant, without proactively thinking about where you are going, and who can help you to get there. It is easy to think that you might get bad advice, so better to have none. As with everything, you need to work at finding good advisors and test them out. As well as providing you with useful information, they will almost certainly enlarge your network in some way, which can often lead to more business.

As a general rule, if you are planning to do something new or different, then getting advice beforehand means you lose nothing other than a little time and expense, and you stand to gain a great deal. If the expense looks large to you, think of the return it will give you before you dismiss it. If it really is too much, then look for alternative sources, but remember that, like you, the best consultants charge high fees because they are the best.

Anna Hipkiss advises consultants in all fields on their business effectiveness. Acting as a sounding board is a particular speciality.