



Compass

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Naked Consulting (continued)

by David A. Schmaltz

At the Positively Making A Difference conference in San Francisco, I made a presentation in my underpants. I invited the audience to step out into the hall for a moment, to allow the stuffy meeting room to breathe, and while their backs were turned, I slipped on a pair of briefs over my corduroys and stood behind the podium.

Once they returned, I started my presentation, introducing my subject—Brief Consulting. I began taking off my dress shirt as I outlined some key premises. The audience, displaying some mystification, watched more or less open-mouthed as I unbuttoned the shirt and set it on the table beside the podium, leaving me in a white cotton tee shirt.

Then I stepped out from behind the podium, displaying in all of their humble glory, a fresh, white pair of Ralph Lauren Polo briefs pulled up over my belt line. (I had considered whether I should wear them over my corduroys or not, but I couldn't see the added utility bare legs might add.) Open mouths started making a lot of noise, most

of it laughter.

There. I had their attention.

I had stopped by a few presentations earlier in the day and found some of the most provocative thinkers of our time explaining stuff. I found in their expositions, little of the felt sense their ideas should have evoked in me. I discovered that I didn't really want to know what they thought, I wanted to be able to think like they did, to experience their world view. What explanation could achieve this?

So, watching the clock count out the time until I would be expected to speak on my subject, I found myself in a familiar dilemma. I was fully prepared to speak on a subject for which speech could only prove to be an inadequate medium. What to do?

I am blessed with a counter-phobic streak. When a tiger shows up, I'm more likely to kiss the tiger than run from it. Thankfully, my counter phobia appeared, as it often has before, at this moment of extremity. So I asked Amy to go find an over-sized pair of cotton briefs—tighty whiteys—and I started playing some scenarios in my head.

As I explained in the last edition of this series on Naked Consulting, I might fail to explain anything here. I am grateful to my colleagues for

reminding me that if you're going to make a real difference, you must remember to include a little madness in your methodology.

Peter Block, who had kicked off the conference with one of his signature thought-provoking rambles, noted that the conference was being held in a place which was not designed for the purpose we were putting it to. After decades of attending conferences, he explained, he had come to the conclusion that this was an eternal feature of conferences.

We line up in tidy rows to consider messy issues. We gather to confer and find our agenda in the way. We suit up to do bare-naked conversation. The least I could do is demonstrate a little touch of what brief consulting might really be about. So I got a little naked and engaged the group in a silly little game or two.

The crowd around the podium after I'd finished had that gleam in their eyes that told me they had caught themselves being themselves that hour. Me too! Perhaps we gather together to discover not what others have brought, but we had with us all along.

May these words help you discover what you already know.

Continued ...



The Suits

by David A. Schmaltz

I'm having lunch with a semi-retired executive, now serving on some non-profit boards and consulting at the highest levels within public firms. He's recounting how a Fortune 100 company came to lose it's way.

"I can remember the exact day they lost it," he continued.

"Wait," I interrupted. "Don't tell me. Let me tell you."

"... Okay," he stammered, curious about what I might say next. "You finish my story."

"They lost their way the day they started listening to The Suits," I said.

Looking a little surprised, then smiling after a moment of reflection, my colleague replied, "Yes, exactly, when they started listening to The Suits."

He continued from where I had interrupted. "Actually, they had started losing their way some time before The Suits arrived, but they had hope of finding it again until they started listening to The Suits. Now they're engaged in a multi-year effort to recover what they were able to do without any one's advice before they started listening to those Suits."

You know The Suits. The consultants, advisors, and coaches who know better than you do. They are more charismatic, have stronger convictions, and carry more real-world experience than you ever will. They dress better, too. The Suits.

It takes two to do this tango.

Do You Need A Consultant?

Tony Bourdain, in his delightful book *Kitchen Confidential*, describes what he calls Terminal Restaurant Syndrome. The terminal cases always call in the restaurant consultants who are, themselves, mostly failed restaurateurs. By the time these Suits arrive, the restaurants are already hemorrhaging money and the last thing any of them need is another outlet for their insufficient cash flow. Calling the consultant is one of the later stages in the death and dying of a restaurant, somewhere between late denial and early acceptance of an inevitable fate.

But that's the restaurant business. Certainly your business, your industry, is different.

Probably not.

Most organizations need consultants about as urgently as a monkey needs a bicycle. I'm not suggesting that a monkey won't find novel uses for a bicycle, nor am I implying that the average monkey can't learn to properly ride a bike with some diligent practice, supported, perhaps, by some Suit's coaching. I mean to say that most organizations don't need consultants in the way that they need capital or luck. Some organizations have undoubtedly died for lack of consultants. Many more have gone down with Suits directing the helmsman.

The simple presence of Suits never seals any organization's fate. The organization's veneration of them does. It's okay to have Suits around, but when you start listening to them, things get dicey. When what The Suit says overrides what you think, feel, or do for yourself, danger looms. The best consulting relationships are those where, when the consultant leaves, the client admits that he probably could have achieved that result for him

self, but he's sure glad the consultant was around to help. The worst ones are where The Suit cannot leave without someone (often the Suit) feeling abandoned.

"You do not need a consultant. No one does. Never. Ever."

You do not *need* a consultant. No one does. Never. Ever. Hiring a consultant should be a matter of choice—an option among several—rather than a necessity. When hiring a consultant seems like the only thing to do, do anything else. Suits have a special gland enabling them to sense desperation and defenselessness. They can and will take advantage of you. After all, they need the work.

Assessing Your Consultant Relationships

Read their promotional material. If you are already engaged in an active consulting relationship, you will find in your consultant's promotional material a prescient description of you.

Here's a mildly edited example of a typical promotional blurb:

"He specializes in helping leaders, managers and individual team members work smarter, not harder. An experienced leader and manager, he works with companies from single entrepreneur to Fortune 500 corporations, helping them efficiently organize systematic processes for achieving quality and business goals. He facilitates change to successfully turn around failing operations. He is a visionary catalyst who leaves operations and the people within them better off than he finds them."

Do you notice this paragraph asking you to self-diagnose some non-specific pathology, like the prescription drug ads on television? You'll

have to admit to needing help. You need to confess to being less organized and less systemic than you should be, and unable to achieve some quality or business goals. You need to acknowledge that your operation is failing or that you're not as well off as you could be. Of course this fuzzy pathology could fit any organization.

I'm always disappointed when I discover that the prescription drug an ad has just convinced me I cannot live without is for geriatric female complaints. You should never be surprised if you feel cramps coming on after you read a consultant's promotional material.

I suspect that this one's a Suit because he advertises himself as a specialist in turning around failing operations, in other words, he can't maintain a status-quo operation or get enough juice from maintaining a successful one. Every Suit's promotional material makes him sound like a Swiss Army knife with a blade to fit virtually any situation. And I have no doubt that this one could add some value to your operation, too. Whether he helps or hinders mostly depends upon you, though, and not the cut of his Suit—his experience, visionary quality, or skill.

Depending Upon You

Almost anyone could walk into your organization and see some things that are invisible to you. If that person has just a little bit of skill, he can help you see what you could never see without him. And this can be a very valuable service to your operations.

Most all of us have a nagging sense that we're overlooking something important. In the trades, we read stories of brilliant successes and recognize in ourselves that we wouldn't have had a freaking clue what to do in those situations. We

read about new methods, ones we're too busy with day-to-day operations to research and implement, and we pine after a capability which seems alluring yet distant, alien, and utterly unreachable from where we stand.

So The Suit's seduction is set. We have visions of becoming world class and we've found the experienced, well-dressed guide to lead us there. Our appetites are properly whetted.

***"... all consultants seduce.
... Clients insist upon it."***

Before I stumble into blaming The Suits for this seductive dance, I should confess that all consultants seduce. Why? Clients insist upon it.

How each copes with this inevitably seductive entrée influences most of the potential within the relationship. You might not feel as though you are encouraging the seduction, but unless you are the rare exception, you are. This can become a mindless game of liar's poker unless one of the players, and it's usually the consultant, understands how to disrupt this destructive pattern. But we all start decked out in our most impressive Suit, accessorized with vitae, track-record, and an intended-to-be-intimidating client list. The Client first judges us by the cut of our suit, and dresses up in an intimidating suit of their own. Curiously, each suits up for what must become a naked engagement.

Aristotle defined a child as anyone ruled by their appetites, and the job of every child to learn, sometimes, to be ruled by something other than their appetites. Suits specialize in working with "children," and most are skilled at transforming even the most mature adult into the hungry child their business depends upon.

What, other than such appetites,

might prompt anyone to engage a consultant? I've been a consultant for many years now, and in that time I've seen the good, the bad, and the unbelievably ugly operating under this shingle. We're not all bad, but none of us are better than the worst of our clients.

I attended a session at a recent conference where the presenter (wearing a beautiful Suit) told stories about how stupid, pathological, and foolish some of his past clients were. One refused the opportunity to reengineer his operation, foregoing a projected multiple return on his investment. Another funded, then roadblocked every suggested improvement. These are normal client behaviors. Any consultant who reports publicly about his stupid clients testifies only to his own incompetence. He's a Suit.

A client can make or break a consultant, but the consultant, in my humble experience, often carries the responsibility for helping the client make them. Those consultants who imagine themselves being your savior, savant, or saint are likely to be the least help and the heaviest burden. Those you imagine to be your savior, savant, or saint are sunk before they leave the docks.

***"Those you imagine to be
your savior, savant, or
saint are sunk before they
leave the docks."***

An open-kimono, peer-to-peer relationship becomes the most useful, though such relationships seem the least likely to emerge from any initial seduction. Suits won't get naked with their clients or help their clients get naked with them, and this distinction makes all the difference. The consultant has to really care about their client, and the client has to really care about the consultant. Without this rapport, little productive can result.

Rapport

Call me jaded, but I've learned to distrust any relationship that starts with anything even vaguely resembling instant rapport. Leave love at first sight for the movies. These fantasies rarely endure until the morning after. Stars have no business in your business eyes and will not survive the inquiring light of any day.

If you leave the first encounter feeling as though the consultant is awfully smart, set the snooze alarm. You're probably under a Suit's spell. The best consultants leave you feeling a little upset at first, as though you are smarter than they are. This is a true indicator of genius, the calling card of someone with whom you might be able to actually accomplish something remarkable.

If you feel suddenly convinced of anything, flee while holding firmly to your wallet. A real consulting relationship, one that might do both you and your consultant some good, begins with a Dedication Test. If the consultant first offers you an unsettling assignment, consider this a good sign. He's getting naked, trying to validate you as his client and himself as your consultant. If either you or The Suit seem awfully anxious to get started, drag your feet. Hasten very slowly at the beginning of every consulting relationship.

If The Suit agrees to do just what you ask, you might not be dealing with a consultant but a contractor. Contractors hire out as a pair of hands while naked consultants hire out for full-body engagement: eyes, ears, mouth, head, hands, and heart. Most consultants, Suits included, are not above agreeing to do 'pair of hands' work, especially if their dance card is empty.

The most valuable service you can

acquire from a consultant is your own insight, sparked by their honest perspective. Most executives could really use someone to tell them when they are full of "it". And if you're seeking consulting help, understand that every real consultant assumes two things from the outset.

- First, that you, as the one seeking help, are the source of whatever difficulty you are trying to resolve. This is good news because this means that you are also the source of whatever resolution you seek. There will be a handy point of leverage available.
- Second, that you've defined the problem in a way that is truly full of "it". If your consultant cannot tell you you're full of "it" or if you can't hear someone telling you you're full of "it", you're dealing with a Suit and picking your own pocket.

Rapport develops over time, proven by simple acts of caring and a sideways detour or two. If you've had more than three visits with your Suit and you've yet to table a disagreement between you, pick a fight. How you resolve the disagreement together will tell you more about the potential in the relationship than any resume could. The rapport remaining after disagreeing, if there is any rapport remaining afterward, will provide a firm foundation upon which you'll do real work together. If you cannot resolve an initial disagreement, how will you ever accomplish anything together?

Choosing Wisely

Most organizations classify consultants as either content or process experts. Suits and real consultants come cut in both styles.

Content experts are the master plumbers of the consulting trade. They know how to work with whatever the equivalent of copper pipe might be in your operation. They are well-versed in the tricks of the trade and can either do the work themselves or teach others to do the work. This minority are practitioners of real, tangible skills. Depending upon how you engage together, content experts can leave you feeling disqualified or enabled. The Suits disqualify, showing up needier than their client—seeming to need to prove their skill at the expense of improving their client's capability. If you do not improve your capability for doing it yourself in the future, The Suits got you.

Most Suits are process consultants and offer fuzzier services. They might or might not know how to do the work themselves, but they know how to define the steps for others. Got a dysfunctional team? Call in a facilitator to lead some group process exploration. Got a poorly operating accounting system? Call in a reengineering consultant. Again, the neediness test distinguishes The Suits from the real consultants. If you achieved your goal but don't feel much like celebrating the accomplishment, The Suits got you. They stole your thunder for themselves.

Process consultants tend to be more generalists than content consultants, though this is not a universal distinction. Process Suits usually sell a specific "method", which arrives like a hammer seeking a nail. Within this frame of reference, almost anything with a paying sponsor behind it qualifies as a nail. Ask them to tell you when their method is not applicable. If they cannot, grab your wallet and flee!

The chief challenge when contracting with any consultant is getting clear about results. This really

flushes The Suits out of the hedgerow. Whether you've contracted with a content or process expert, you're really purchasing a result—an outcome—and the consultant's content or process knowledge is never more than a means for achieving that end. Don't forget. The Suits will try to help you forget this.

I wish I had a dollar today for every prospective client I've had who tried to entice me into meaningless work. Not just meaningless for me, but truly meaningless for them as well. As a long-time workshop purveyor, I can't count the number of prospective clients who've tried to hire me to deliver workshops. Had I not pressed the point about how crazy it is to sponsor a workshop for the purpose of sponsoring a workshop, we might not have ever found the real purpose for these engagements. Once we got to the bottom of the desire to sponsor a workshop, we could work together toward achieving something other than burning up a few days of their most valuable employees' time. Suits don't do this.

Will the consultant agree to contract for results, or simply for time? Suits contract for time. Beware of their phony targets. Re-engineering an accounting system ain't a result. It's an aspiration. What will a reengineered accounting system get you? Your answer might be a result. Engage in the uncomfortable conversation until you find some way to describe what will be really different at the end, then contract for that.

Will the consultant guarantee his work? Suits won't. The largest consulting firms employ armies of attorneys to settle the disagreements that result from them not guaranteeing their work. These Suits could adopt a policy of refunding fees whenever a client is not satisfied, but they don't. Try it though. If you're really interested

in achieving your objective, and not just twiddling around "sponsoring workshops" with Suits, and the consultant is the right one for the job, ask for a money back guarantee. Consider it a dedication test. If the consultant isn't skilled enough to satisfy you, in spite of the certain shifting sands between agreement and result, perhaps he isn't your consultant. He might even be a Suit.

Naked Consulting

No doubt about it, consultants have developed a bad reputation. Some over charge and under-deliver. These Suits *should* have a bad reputation. Some collude with their clients. These Suits and their clients deserve whatever disappointment they earn from their misguided efforts. Few clients are the rubes The Suits imagine them to be. Even fewer Suits are half as omniscient as you might imagine they are.

Peter Drucker noted that the greatest value he ever gave to any client was to observe without knowing much about what he was observing. He was an expert at not being an expert. He took off his expert's suit and got naked with his clients, and in so doing, he helped his clients get naked, too. This sort of consulting is the most valuable and the most difficult to come by.

Who would hire a naked consultant? How could you classify this expert at not being an expert? He is neither a content nor a process consultant. He is a fair witness, a wise counselor, a skilled observer of all familiarity forces his clients to see right through. He trades in insight, not universal truth. No hammer. No nail. No process. No Suit! Nothing but satisfying results and more capable clients.

Naked consultants advertise. They even seduce. Talk with them. They

promise neither transformation nor salvation, but help you discover both.

You hear about them by word of mouth, from someone intrigued by and satisfied with their work. When naked consultants leave, their clients admit that they probably could have accomplished that result by themselves, but they're sure glad they had the help. They leave behind a lingering, loosened-tie innocence, a slightly different way of looking at the world that doesn't extinguish over time. A difference that really makes a difference.

Be mindful. If you've broken your leg, call a content expert. If you've broken a relationship, call a process expert. If your doctor accepts your diagnosis for a puzzling pathology and offers you a palliating certainty, question your intentions before you question the doctor's. Then question the doctor's intentions. And don't swallow that pill!

The Suits are a real and present danger to you and your success. They know how to prey upon you and how to encourage you to prey upon yourself. They can help, but only if you can learn to help yourself. You can usually recover from even the worst of them, but you will be surprised at how long that recovery might take.

Real doctors know that 90% of all illness cures itself. Real consultants help you make this remarkable discovery; that you actually can heal yourself.

Join our discussion considering the future of consulting. (Enrollment required)

<http://groups-beta.google.com/group/BriefConsulting>

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Compass is a navigation tool for continuing your practice of improving your experience. Compass shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our experiences by sharing our stories and our insights.

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•Minimal Intervention, Maximum Impact•

True North pgs, we're not just about projects anymore.

A young teacher, assigned to a one-room schoolhouse to complete her certification, met a boy who wrote everything backwards. Listening to his story, she learned that past teachers had tied his left hand behind his back to encourage him to write with his right hand. He'd mas-

tered writing, except his letters came out backwards. The teacher encouraged the boy to write with his left hand, to employ his natural capability, and he was soon writing better than anyone in the school.

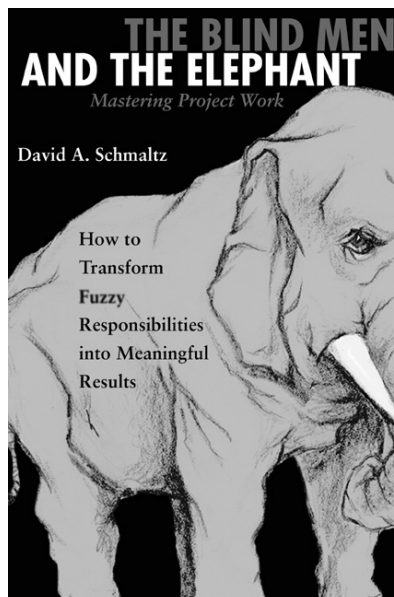
True North's Brief Consulting' helps identify and leverage what you've got to produce remarkable results.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

•There were six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined...•

So begins John Godfrey Saxe's fable of the blind men who failed to see an elephant together. Though each was able to perceive their piece of the beast, none were able to integrate their individual perspective into a coherent whole.

The result? You've seen it on each of your projects. During that time, which sometimes extends until after the project



concludes, factions argue about the true nature of the beast which none of the combatants will ever see.

In my book, *The Blind Men and the Elephant, Mastering Project Work*, (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), I consider this universal feature of our project work and offer some simple tactics for creating the coherent experiences we each aspire to achieve.

Google the title or my name to see reviews of the book. Now available in Dutch as *De Blinden En De Olifant*. It'll soon be available in Chinese, Russian, Turkish, Spanish, and Korean.

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