



Compass

Special Supplement to: VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2.3



Mastering Projects Workshop

by David A. Schmaltz



Last year, we worked with a group of exceptional project managers. Drawn from the largest and most successful construction companies in the world, each of which exemplify process maturity, professionalism, and experience, we guided them through one of our trademark "silly little games."

This game took about five minutes to play and simulated some important elements of every project. We invited each person to pursue a goal. After soliciting questions, we started play.

The group had spent the two previous days considering how they might improve their project work, and the walls were papered with significant insights.

In the next five minutes, this group ignored most of the insights they had so painstakingly discovered. They had acknowledged the value of cooperating, but then competed fiercely. They had been thinking outside the box, but the only person to approach the game differently was chided for her inventiveness. In short, they caught

themselves in deep contradiction between their talk and their walk.

Following the quick five minute game, we spent more time than was scheduled considering the contradictions each had discovered there. As they demonstrated, even those most steeped in knowing about project work—even those most experienced in the practice of professional project management—live in deep contradiction most of the time.

True North will be offering an open-enrollment public Mastering Projects Workshop in Portland, OR — January 18-20, 2005. Call 503 539-7397 or write Amy@ProjectCommunity.com to enroll.

One participant explained how his company's finance people tell him how much value he is supposed to earn each week, based on current market forces, without regard to the painstakingly developed plans and schedules. Another described how his baseline schedule was comprised of believable fiction, with each subcontractor securing their bid by playing a thinly-disguised form of liars poker.

Welcome to the real world of project work, where theory gets subverted by politics, finances, and

tenacious humanity.

We created our **Mastering Projects Workshop** to supplement with some real-world acknowledgments the many fine theory-based certification programs, methodology classes, and technique seminars.

Real learning, or so say Harvard Business School educators, requires some personally-transforming experience. Where were you when you had your most profound learning experience? Were you in a classroom? Was a teacher even present? Did the course outline predict it? Probably not!

Perhaps more important, what would entice anyone to even engage in a profound learning experience? We might acknowledge that personal transformation is the key to real learning, but who would be fool enough to volunteer for anything likely to upset their carefully organized apple cart? Most attend training for confirmation, not transformation.

What do you do when you don't know what to do? Are you a master of your contradictions or do your projects leave you stuck with some impossibility? If you'd like to master your contradictions, consider attending our Mastering Projects Workshop

More shamelessness following:

Your Handy 2005 True North Public Workshop Schedule

Learning is a life-long pursuit, punctuated with workshops. The plot line is never defined by the punctuation. Still, without punctuation, even the most clever plot becomes meaningless.

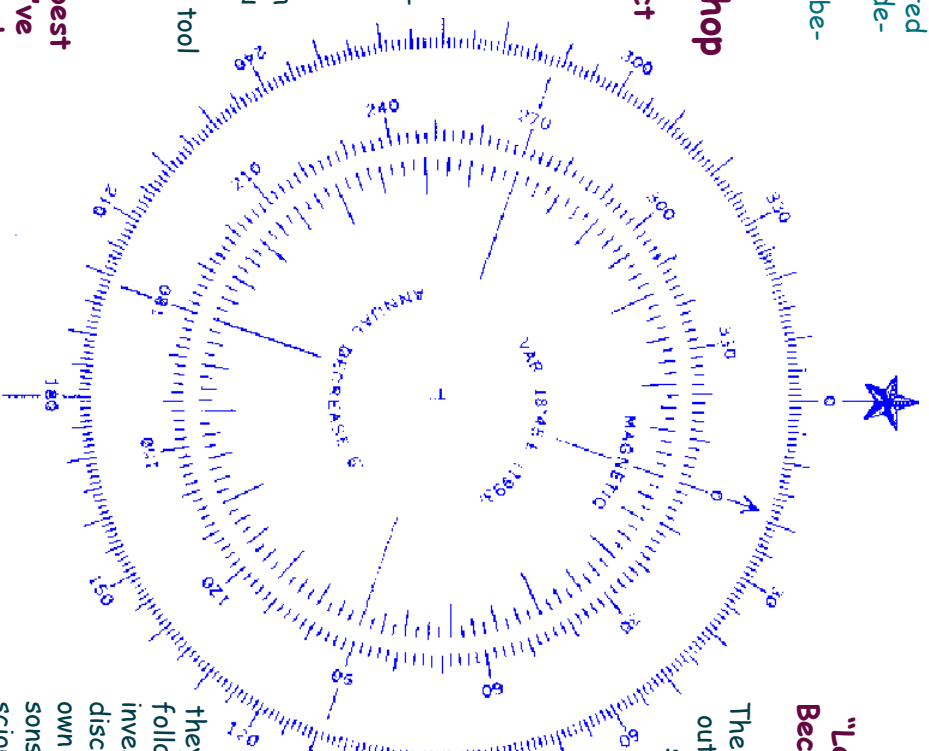
Mastering Projects Workshop

"You are the Most Powerful Project Management Tool You Will Ever Use."

Project leaders, contributors, sponsors, and customers have found that True North's Mastering Projects Workshop helped them better cope with the real world contradictions common to every type of project. Rather than attempt to demonstrate how projects are supposed to work, MPW considers how projects actually work in your real-world situation, and helps you discover how it is that you are, indeed, the most powerful project management tool you will ever use.

"This workshop was not just the best project management workshop I've ever attended, it was the best workshop -- period -- that I've ever attended."

Three-day Part I & Half-day Part II
January 18-20, 2005 & April 15, 2005
April 12-14, 2005 & June 24, 2005
June 21-23, 2005 & October 14, 2005
October 11-13, 2005 & January 13, 2006



Beyond Leadership

"Learning How to Teach Yourself to Become the Leader You Aspire to Be"

The finest leaders in history have struck out on their own, inventing a leadership style and practice well suited to their temperament and their unique situations. While we might become informed by studying these leaders, we cannot hope to succeed as a leader by simply adopting their practices. If we are to become powerful leaders, we must engage in the entrepreneurial invention that has supported every great leader's practice. Otherwise, you're following, not leading.

Beyond leadership helps individuals discover how to teach themselves what they need to become the leader they aspire to be. Rather than learning to follow others' models of leadership, you investigate your own behavior patterns. By discovering how you succeed and fail in your own situations, you begin to learn the lessons that grow into the ability to more consciously employ your skills, especially in those moments when different choices are needed.

"Not a Week's Workshop, But an Introduction to a Life's Work"

March 13-19, 2005
September 18-24, 2005

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The Naked Consulting Series!

True North performance guidance strategies



Compass

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2.3



Brief Consulting™

by David A. Schmaltz

"In the instant between perception and action, belief and behavior, lies the power to change the world." Amy Schwab

For everyone dismayed that True North has abandoned a successful project management practice in favor of some curious notion about consulting, and for those who have counseled us to ditch the project stuff to focus upon what we "really" do, I submit this resolution.

Within every engagement, whether it's called a consultation or a project, an initiative or a coaching, some small moments emerge as critical to the result. Whatever the method employed or the touted technique, each engagement distills, in retrospect, to these few unforgettable moments.

These moments are never predicted in the plan or required in the specification. They usually arrive as unwanted intrusions into the certainty fueling forward momentum. At the conjunction of the planned trajectory and some unexpected contradiction appears a moment of awareness, an instant of acknowledgement which stalls the

smooth, confident progress toward the future. What we choose to do in these moments transforms whatever happens next.

Our activities are more than punctuated with these moments, they are comprised of them. Yet we experience only a precious few, as if operating on auto-pilot between discoveries. Our full choices never become available except at these odd times, when curiously, choices seem less available.

We gratefully miss most of our opportunities for leveraging these moments. Discarding the map in favor of continuous discovery would be no better than slavishly sticking to our map. Yet without the ability to sometimes discard the map and leverage these moments, contradictions compromise results; we cannot get there from here.

Brief Consulting leverages these instants between perception and action, belief and behavior. Whatever label a consultant uses—coach, manager, leader, consultant—this powerful capability creates the difference that makes a real difference.

Each consultant either leverages these moments—or not. Consulting without attending to these opportunities becomes like lip-syncing without ever hearing the underlying melody.

This is subtle, essential, unspeakable stuff. As one who always strives to explain details, I can explain only that I cannot explain Brief Consulting. I have only stories to share. These might elicit some principles without ever explaining anything.

Brief Consultants help their clients resolve their contradictions. Every plan of action carries some unacknowledged contradictions within it. When a contradiction appears, we seem predisposed only to respond by looking for a logical explanation of the cause. As if engaged in a fruitless rock-paper-scissors game, logical explanations cannot resolve dilemmas. Logic never has and never will resolve them, and contradictions always emerge. We need something else. We need choices.

Brief Consulting embodies that something else, a subtle capability essential to the consultant's trade.

This issue of the Naked Consulting series shares some stories and reflections on the experience of Brief Consulting, on that tiny illusory moment between perception and action, belief and behavior. May these stories elicit the deeper understanding which could never emerge from anyone explaining anything.

More on the following pages



Cura Te Ipsum

Two years ago, the single worst thing that could have happened, happened. My dream came true. My book, which had been a private project shared with a few close colleagues, became a public commodity: an open book.

I hired a world-class publicist, who encouraged me to distill the book's message into what she called a BIG IDEA. She explained that media expects publicity to distill whatever it promotes into a single BIG IDEA, amplified with three to five supporting concepts. We worked for over a month trying on this frame, then another, then another and another before choosing to explain the book as being about juiciness.

I wrote four feature-length articles introducing the BIG IDEA, and with the publicist created a short quiz and some interview questions for the media to echo back about the book. I also agreed to engage in media training, where I worked with a coach to learn how to stay on topic, take charge of an interview in that crucial first twelve seconds, and avoid explaining too much. (Hey, I had always considered that to be a feature!)

We expected dozens of high-level placements and received a handful. After five months, we agreed to terminate the campaign early, as it was not producing the expected results. I initiated a more grassroots campaign, visiting bookstores and scheduling some book signing events. I started a Discussion Group¹, where those who had read the book could chat about practical application of some of the key ideas, and where we began to ex-

hibit the real BIG IDEA in the book—the road to coherence can be messy but not necessarily unsatisfying. Some contributed to argue their perspective. Many came to watch, lurking in the cyber-shadows, much as they might in a real project assignment.

One of my dearest friends found the book unreadable. Another admitted that she fussed through the first two thirds because it wasn't written "like a business book." Others began to challenge my stories, as if I were telling them what to do, and as if my stories about my experiences weren't true.

I had become the author, the con- venger, the expert, and my opinions and perspectives began to carry unintended weight.

The most common feedback I received went something like this: *"I have managed projects in some of the most successful companies in the world and I have always found that the way I was supposed to be managing them didn't work for me. I spent many years trying to reform myself, and then I read your book. In it, I found validation that someone else had experienced what I have experienced. Thank you."* A a a a ah!

I met a few connectors during this period, people who were impressed with the book and were as baffled as I was that so few had picked it up. Their typical response was, *"This is absolutely essential information and everyone working should know it!"* My consulting business went into a period of suspended animation.

Each connector patiently exhorted me to "Describe what you do!" I tried on several shiny Elvis suits during this period, but none of them really fit. My advisors could tell me when I didn't have the story right, but none could tell me what

the story about the story really should say. They offered me key attributes, BIG IDEAS about the BIG IDEA, but not the BIG IDEA itself. This has been exhausting, frustrating work. Before I found the need to publicly explain my work, I could engage in it freely. Once I, now a published author—a presumed master of language—started to explain my explanations, I found myself lost in a seemingly endless self-referential swirl. I'm still there.

Physician Heal Thyself

Not crying into my own beer here, I'm trying to make a point. The old Latin irony challenging the physician to heal himself can produce self-referential swirls. Some things require help. No physician, no matter how skilled, can perform open heart surgery on him self. Finding resolution often requires some assistance.

In ancient societies, only those medicine men suffering from their patient's illness were qualified to treat the infirmity. And so it is with Brief Consulting. Any consultant not tangled in some self-referential swirl cannot be fully qualified to help another escape from theirs. We inevitably find clues in our own contradictions.

I will know how I should describe my work shortly after I hear myself describing it to someone else. I will hear bits of my story in others'. I can usually distinguish my shit from your Shinola®, but I'm not above sometimes shining my shoes with excrement. Neither are you.

Principle One: THE CLIENT IS ALWAYS CAPABLE OF RESOLVING THEIR OWN DIFFICULTY, WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM SOMEONE AS EXPERIENCED AS THEY ARE AT BEING STUCK WITH THE IMPOSSIBLE.

1. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MasteringProjectWork/>



Confirming What They Already Knew

"My client called out of the blue. 'I'm not sure why I'm calling you,' he confided, 'I have this intuition that you might be able to help.'"

As one who often operates on intuition, my ears pricked up. "What's the difficulty?" I asked.

A typical litany followed. He described a runaway project, one started small, with the best of intentions, now threatening to consume the company. He explained the history of responses to this devil, and I recognized most of the usual suspects.

My client was stuck with the impossible. He had been stuck like this before. "What do you want?" I asked, knowing full-well that he wanted this project fixed.

"I want you to come back here for a few days and tell me what you see," he replied.

"How will I know when I'm done?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Perhaps you could write a report."

So, after asking for some inconvenient background information (a dedication test), which he cheerfully supplied, we settled on terms and I left a few days later for the cross-country flight.

The following morning, I met my client and his AVP for a quick breakfast. I don't remember saying much. Their stories filled the table. I watched more than I listened. I reflected upon how these two interacted. My client, a blazingly brilliant man, easily dominated the conversation. His AVP, an equally brilliant woman but more introverted, had a lot of her sen-

tences finished for her. My client finally excused himself, leaving me and his AVP to adjourn to her office.

About ten minutes later she started crying. She cried for a very long time behind that tightly closed executive office door. Having just met her, I hesitated before offering a reassuring hand. She accepted the gesture, apologizing for her unprofessional behavior.

We spoke quietly after that. Then I started my rounds, visiting with the cast members. Everyone had their stories, and each gushed out as if under considerable pressure. Those I met ranged in skill from incompetent to wizard, yet each were in a curious suspended animation where whatever they did left them with even more of the same. Stuck with the impossible.

Later that afternoon, I returned to the AVP's office. "So, what do you want?" I asked.

"I want to get out of here. This is an unworkable situation. I know I cannot succeed no matter what I do."

"Yes," I confirmed her observation. "You cannot succeed here. So, how would you like to fail? You have the choice of failing by continuing this sad dance or by leaving the dance floor."

She chose to leave. Before leaving, she fired the obviously incompetent project manager and sued the contracting firm he rode in on. The project was refocused, but continued to be stuck with the obviously impossible. My client finally accepted that the project needed to be killed, and he devised a politically acceptable means for accomplishing that.

I never did write that report. My work was done that first morning when tears replaced the stories. I

didn't fix their project, either, they fixed it themselves, emboldened after I'd confirmed what they'd all already known all along.

I was invited back a few more times. Next to help with the replacement effort, which, not surprisingly, started heading down its predecessor's same, well trod trail. After that, I returned for a few brief engagements to help the team learn how to more fully acknowledge the obvious.

Brief Consultants focus upon helping their clients more fully acknowledge what they already know. Contradictions blind us to the obvious, stealing our most powerful responses. We all go unconscious under their influence. A small, quiet acknowledgement is often all that's needed to awaken the client's slumbering natural coping capabilities.

Principle Two: CONFIRM WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW



Counseling The Counseling Center

Assigned responsibility for managing his university's crisis counseling center, a service providing help to students, a colleague found that a typical crisis intervention took from several days to several weeks to begin and often stretched into months, even years to conclude. Looking further, he found that, to determine the nature of the difficulty, each client was first scheduled to take to a battery of diagnostic tests. Then, once the assessment identified a pathology and a practitioner verified it and prescribe a course of treatment, only then did a clinician begin their crisis intervention work.

If this really was a crisis center, this Brief Consultant concluded,

the lengthy diagnostic process and protracted treatment regimens seemed to have become greater problems than the crises they were intended to resolve. Since irresolution prolonged the clients' crises, he decided to defer the diagnostics until after immediate, same day counselling interviews. He found that without ever assessing pathology, most crises were resolved to the client's and the clinician's satisfaction with a single session.

The head of the psychological diagnostic department learned of this decision and wrote a threatening letter to the dean because the students administering these tests were no longer getting the practical experience they needed for professional certification. But the clients were satisfied and the crises were being resolved with unprecedented speed and effectiveness.

What was the purpose of the crises counselling center? Clearly, as in every organization, the center had conflicting missions. The strategy for resolving these contradictions had spawned a larger problem than the original one.

My How The Clients Love To Be Diagnosed!

How often have I engaged as the crisis prolonging center did? A client arrives with an urgent complaint and I (with their encouragement) insist upon diagnosing pathology first. Then I carefully lay out a course of treatment which prolongs irresolution in favor of addressing the "real" root cause, in the belief (often unsupported in practice) that by resolving the identified root cause, they will avoid similar future difficulties. All this while the crisis continues and the client suffers, when we might be able to resolve the complaint with a brief intervention.

Tradition says that good resolution requires good diagnosis. Does experience support this notion? HMOs insist upon a definite description of pathology before they will reimburse, even though ascribing pathology can complicate resolution.

One practicing clinical psychologist admitted to providing plausible fiction to HMOs, understanding that trying to explain what she really does to help her clients would never garner reimbursement. The systems in place to ensure effective treatment can encumber effective treatment by insisting upon diagnosing the client as some form of crazy before resolution can begin. How sane is that?

"The systems in place to ensure effective treatment can encumber effective treatment by insisting upon diagnosing the client as some form of crazy before resolution can begin. How sane is that?"

Most of the students entering the counselling center are not crazy. They are stuck with some contradiction, in the same way that the counselling center was stuck in its contradiction. Their strategy for resolving their dilemmas became a larger problem than their original complaint. Trying to logically resolve the contradiction creates an endless, exhausting effort which became a greater difficulty.

A very few "complaintants" are really ill, and these cases can be identified and referred for additional diagnostic tests and more in-depth treatments following the initial session. The vast majority of complaints can be quickly talked out with the help of an experienced counsellor. These never need become the sort of pathology requiring diagnosis. Why clog up the service queue with unnecessary assessments?

Are organizations in crises different from these students? Often not. Then why do so many consultants insist upon diagnosing pathology before pursuing resolution; targeting "the" root cause rather than just resolving the stuckness?

We might find one answer in how we contract for consulting work. Clients often demand an HMO-like process, requiring specific diagnosis and treatment plans before the consultant engages. This requirement encourages early, faulty diagnosis and misguided resolution strategies in the interest of controlling the engagement. These stand in the way of achieving real results. In response, many consultants mirror the clinical psychologist, offering believable fiction to their clients. What else could they do?

The client is rarely sick or deluded, but stuck and fully capable of resolving their own contradictions once they fully acknowledge them.

Stuckness is usually the problem. How we cope with stuckness can become both the source of continued irresolution and, could we switch coping strategies, the most likely source of resolution, too. The process for enrolling clients in the counselling center seemed necessary and immutable, anything but the source of an abiding difficulty. It became the source of an abiding difficulty.

The Brief Consultant helps their client discover a moment where what seems necessary and immutable becomes merely a choice among many. Expose the myth behind the necessity and the stuckness evaporates. Then an array of alternative possibilities appear.

Principle Three: STUCKNESS IS USUALLY THE PROBLEM



Failing to Fix the Past

If the stuckness IS often the problem, whatever the root cause might be, why not unstick first? The Brief Consultant's remarkable insight centers around the acknowledgment that if you resolve the stuckness by proliferating choices, the root cause, whatever it was, often becomes moot—so start there. Searching for root causes focuses attention upon the past, which cannot be changed, except by changing your story about it. Consultants and their clients discover that the endless search for pathology and root cause has been the greatest barrier to achieving results and stands tenaciously in the way of any permanent resolution.

The barriers to employing Brief Consulting techniques are mostly found in how we approach difficulties, not in the complexity of the resolution techniques. The techniques themselves are disarmingly simple, but the perspective needed to effectively deploy them challenges our deepest notions of how consultants and clients are supposed to work together.

The first and perhaps the most difficult barrier is the whole idea that a diagnosis is necessary. No pathology need be identified and no standard resolution process need be employed. Instead, a conversation occurs. This conversation engages the client and the consultant in exploring the situation rather than identifying the cause and prescribing discrete steps to resolution. In this conversation, the consultant is anything but the expert in the difficulty, and often assumes a 'one step down' association, thereby elevating the client to the role of expert about their own difficulty.

The client's description of their own experience, rather than the consultant's prior knowledge or experience, becomes the primary source of information about resolving the difficulty.

So what's the consultant doing? She's observing moments; patterns in the client's description, in the client's interaction, in her own reaction to the story. By focusing upon moments, some deeper insights can be observed than if she focused upon the client's behavior, pathology, or the simple story line. The consultant becomes a reflective observer and by so doing, helps the client more reflectively observe, too.

Using the client's own story, the consultant guides the client in a process called *preferencing*. Rather than insisting upon a clear statement of objective or a specific resolution strategy, the consultant guides the client into a series of distinction-making choices to determine what might constitute a satisfactory resolution now. The idea is to help the client more fully acknowledge their own contradictions and preferences, and to proliferate choices, so the difficulty might be addressed in a variety of acceptable ways.

Often, just recounting the story behind the difficulty enables the client to acknowledge the contradictions and discover more satisfying ways of addressing them. Insights are common here, but can be easily overlooked in the distraction of diagnosis, prescription, and treatment common to other consulting techniques.

What Changes?

In this culture, we most often look for physical evidence of change. We assess behaviors or look for a different arrangement of physical objects. The Brief Consultant

looks for a shift in perspective. As in the crisis center story, the first shift awakens a fuller acknowledgment of the present contradictions. The second shift moves the client away from their certainty. Perhaps the current resolution strategy might not be necessary for resolving these contradictions after all. Other choices emerge. Only the slightest permission encourages the client to make a different choice.

The client becoming aware of the discretionary nature of the "imperatives" facing him resolves the crisis. This dissolves the stuckness and opens up the possibility for something previously unimaginable to occur.

No one can describe this transformation. It sounds about as profound as the old joke where a doctor suggests that the patient avoid moving their arm "like that" to resolve a pain. This transformation is no joke.

The space between apparent imperative and unacknowledged preference is always filled with an infinite set of undiscovered choices.

Most stuckness results from some damned whatever you do set of apparently imperative choices. This Illusion of Choice offers no real choice at all. What are the not damned whatever you do choices? This question becomes the only germane question when acknowledging such binds.

The Brief Consultant understands that there are an infinite number of not damned alternatives behind every damned-if-you-do/damned-if-you-don't illusion of choice.

Principle Four: CONSIDER PREFERENCE TO PROLIFERATE CHOICE



Booting Out The Bootcamp

A client called, unsettled with an assignment. His boss, an acknowledged tyrant, had directed him to design a "Bootcamp" workshop for the most skilled professionals in his organization. The client didn't believe that a bootcamp would resolve the difficulties (he wasn't even sure what difficulties were supposed to be addressed), but his boss had warned him that if he didn't pull this off, he would be fired. This was a real dilemma—damning him whatever he chose to do.

He had spent the prior week outlining various agendas for the bootcamp, in preparation for a presentation for his boss. He called to ask me to review the outlines and suggest how they might be improved. I questioned the assignment. Since I didn't know the details of his situation, I balked at suggesting improvements. I amplified his contradiction, asking him how he would feel if some staffer from corporate designed a training for him without asking him what he thought was important.

Rather than report to headquarters the following Monday with a firm proposal, he chose to postpone the meeting. This royally pissed off his tormentor. He spent the next week calling the professionals targeted to attend this bootcamp, and in those conversations, he amplified many contradictions. Then he did the unthinkable. He scheduled a meeting with his boss and shared his unsettling discoveries.

Was he fired? He most certainly could have been, but he was not. Instead, his boss considered this new information and said, "This is what I want this boot camp experi-

ence to teach this group to do. They need to look more deeply into their clients' imperative orders and help them discover unimaginable resolutions."

My client's influence soared. He escaped from a tenacious damned whatever he did contradiction and found latitude for mutual success. This is Brief Consulting.

I admit that I did not know at the beginning how he might choose to resolve his difficulty. In conversation, we both disclosed our observations, undressing the formal assignment to discover contradictions as well as other options beneath. I was guided by my conviction that my client was not sick, only stuck, and that his boss was not evil, and probably more stuck than my client. I firmly believed that they were both fully qualified to resolve their own difficulties, if only they could find some satisfactory choices within their imperative obligations.

I could have, as I have in the past, merely responded to his request and helped him design a state of the art bootcamp, but we both would have been solving the wrong problem and would have never known the possibilities we forfeited in chasing that all too obvious tail. Opening possibilities in conversation didn't guarantee any result, but it increased the number of choices available for resolving the situation. Resolution arrived in a surprising and delightful way, and in a way that was unthinkable before the conversation occurred.

Had I engaged instead in a diagnostic process to drill down to the root cause of the difficulty, we might have discovered such mundane and unaddressable factors as an overbearing boss. Then what would we have done? Set out to reform the boss?

Had I simply told him what to do

(as if I knew!), what would he have learned? Would his capability be enhanced for coping with similar contradictions or would he have learned only to call me when he got stuck in the future?

We all work hard to stay safe and most of us don't notice when our safety strategies imperil us. My bootcamp client found a moment to respond to his contradictions by doing the one thing that he would never seriously consider doing; an "anything but that" response. Because contradictions are illogical, such illogical responses often resolve them. Better safe than sorry easily festers into the sorriest sort of safety.

Principle Five: CONSIDER "ANYTHING BUT THAT!"



Out There or In Here?

What do these five principles have in common? A shift from 'out there' to 'in here.' I often see consultants identifying what I call 'out there' causes. This tactic encourages excursions into essentially unchangeable territory. Then what do we do? We usually do even more of the same.

Those pursuing some mandate can find them self chasing escalating even-more-of-the-same tactics. Projects not working right? Formalize! Still not right? Even more formalization! Since results from 'out there' targets can require long wait times before anything resolves, the pursuit, rather than achieving results, easily becomes the primary occupation of the consultant and their client. With each escalating disappointment, even more of essentially the same 'out there' scheme gets heaped onto the difficulty. The heap eventually becomes a greater problem than the original complaint ever was.

Brief Consulting focuses upon a more convenient point of leverage, what we call 'in here' focus. If I want you to move, I can order you to move or try to influence you to want to move. Or, I can move myself in relation to you, thereby influencing you to move in response. By taking full responsibility for my part of the stuckness and acting 'in here' to resolve it, I enhance my own mobility and encourage mobility in others, too.

The Certainty Problem

The certainty that 'out there' solutions can be *the* only real solutions contributes to every client's stuckness. These certainties distill into 'want to, have to, and can't' dilemmas, which become, with repetition, the recipe for never attaining anything.

Trading this certainty for preference and possibility might seem like trading a proven cow for a handful of magic beans. Proliferating choice always seems unnecessary from a position of certainty.

If there is a problem, our certainty is often that problem. But we dare not solve certainty. We can co-opt it by finding one small moment where an imperative becomes a choice among many. In this brief moment, surrounded by choice, certainty becomes a weaker alternative.

This, then, is an introduction to the future of consulting. There will always be room in this field for contractors to do their client's bidding, but even their practice can be improved by learning how to master these brief moments. The smallest, infinitesimal piece of every consultant's work might be by far the most significant element.

Here's a handy summary of what I've tried to avoid explaining above.



BRIEF



Belief: We believe that our clients are not broken, sick, deluded, or stupid. We believe instead that our clients are fully functional, supremely capable, marvelously adaptive—and stuck. They are suffering from a severe case of the normals. We seek to identify a moment of mobility instead of directly addressing their complaint.

Reflect: We observe. We attend to moments rather than behavior. We share our own reactions to the story before us. We check our own mirror and encourage our client to check their mirror, too.

Inquire: We defer diagnosing cause or prescribing resolution and consider contradictions with the client instead. We acknowledge our own considerable experience with being stuck, and in so doing, we elevate the client to the role of expert and deliberately step down into the role of 'expert at not being an expert' so the client can resolve their own difficulty.

Engage: We talk about what's not supposed to be talked about. This helps our clients identify and more fully acknowledge the contradictions facing them. The way things are is the way things are. We comment on what's obvious, amplifying contradictions rather than offering advice for resolving them.

Find: We help the client identify moments out of the continuum, 'in here' choices beyond what their certainty insists must be resolved 'out there'. We guide our client through a process of identifying preferences to get really clear about their preferences, so that a satisfying array of choices becomes available. Then we offer permission to choose in the moment. Rather than insist upon a

treatment strategy, we purposefully stand aside and let the client decide how they would like to proceed now.

These seemingly simple tactics can quickly create the most remarkable results. That the consultant too often focuses more upon telling their client what they think they need to know—and that the client too often focuses upon their consultant clueing them in—has been the chief difficulty. Leaving certainty at the door opens up unimaginable possibilities. Why? Who cares? If we want results rather than the endless pursuit of results, Brief Consulting offers some real promise for the future.



Appreciations

I could not have created this *Compass* series without the generosity of some very helpful people. Thank you:

Manuel Diaz and Barbara Anger-Diaz for encouraging conversation,

Bill Burnett and Cynthia Benjamin for challenging my certainty,

Amy Schwab for asking unanswerable questions,

Greg Howell and Hal Macomber of the Lean Construction Institute for warm hospitality,

Doug Ballon for listening to himself,

Douglas Flemons for practicing what I've been preaching,

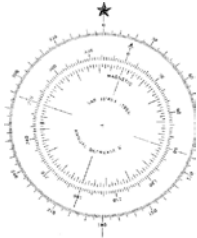
Wilder Schmaltz for putting the sheep into wolf's clothing.

Join our discussion considering the future of consulting. <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/Brief-Consulting>



About *Compass*

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Upcoming Workshops

True North pgs will be conducting two open enrollment workshops in the first half of 2005.

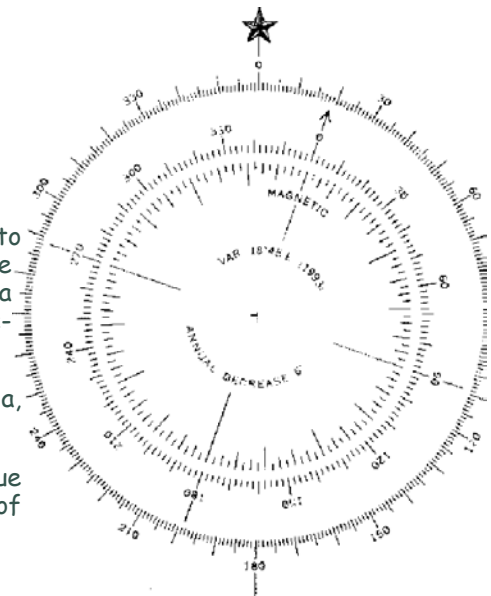
January 18-20, **Mastering Projects Workshop** in Portland, OR. "You are the most powerful project management tool you will ever use." If you'd like to learn how to leverage this most powerful tool, contact us for details.

Beyond Leadership:

"A Program for Learning How to Teach Yourself to Become the Leader You Aspire to Be" Not a week's workshop, but an introduction to a life's work!

March 13-19, 2005 in Walla Walla, WA

Find out why Harvard called True North to learn about the future of leadership training!

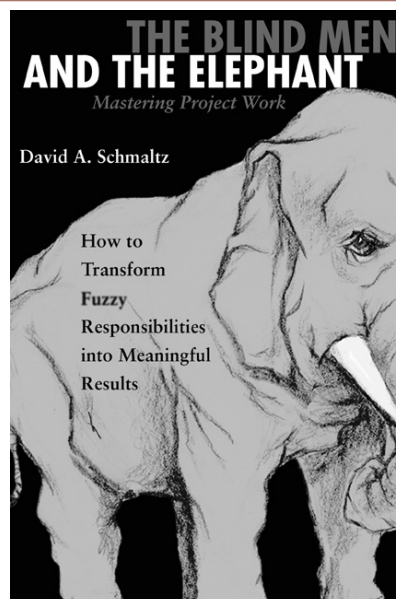


The Blind Men and the Elephant

"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.

Order your copy today:

<http://www.bkconnection.com>