

Fads, Focus and Fast Answers Getting Value from Your Business Adviser

Getting Some Help for Blurred Vision

I recently had cause to visit an optometrist who, after conducting a number of tests, declared that I had entered my presbyopic age. I presumed that he was officially confirming a view long held by my children that I was a dinosaur. He reassured me that presbyopia is the medical term for ones diminished ability to focus, due to a weakening of certain optical muscles.

It occurred to me that some businesses I observe display a similar organisational symptom of this loss of clarity of sight. Early in the life cycle of most businesses there is a very keen focus on outputs and growth. As time goes by things can become more comfortable and they don't have to push quite so hard to succeed.

Sometimes, external business advisers are used to bring renewed focus to organisations. Management consultants in particular have often provided the "business spectacles" to help senior management regain clearer vision from their organisation to the broader business environment. The problem with this can be that on some occasions the consultants only have one set of spectacles to offer. It has been said that if the only tool you have is a hammer then you must treat every problem as a nail.

The consulting profession has, to some degree, been propelled by a procession of fads. As James O'Shea and Charles Madigan opine in their book "Dangerous Company", there is a recipe for becoming a management guru. It starts with an article in the Harvard Business Review; this is then padded into a book it is hoped will turn into a best seller. The next step is to market it for all its worth through a consulting company. Other consultants sometimes then repackage these fads and a whole new iteration is born.

I am not suggesting that the processes and concepts that are developed are not valuable. Indeed, the contrary is often the case. I am suggesting however, that using only one process, system or concept as a one size fits all solution is almost certainly not going to succeed. To assume that, assumes that every business is like every other business, and it is serving a market like every other market.



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New Approaches

If that's what won't work, then what will? My belief is that management consultants can provide valuable support to organisations when they are able to access and apply a range of appropriate methodologies. This also includes taking parts of several approaches and crafting a unique solution to meet the needs of a client. On a recent assignment which will result in the increased market share and profitability of a private company, we have used elements of management by objective, quality, project management planning and lean manufacturing to create a unique solution for that organisation.

This eclectic approach can present a number of barriers. It is not as easy to sell as an off the shelf and readily understandable solution. It requires a lot more up front project design work to tailor a project. On the up side, there is a far greater chance of success if the consulting approach is tailored to a particular organisation for a particular time and market. It is also reasonable to expect that this methodology would be more resource efficient.

Quick Advice or Right Advice

The old consulting adage says that for every business problem there is a perfectly simple but wrong answer. The steady diet of neatly packaged and readily saleable consulting products exist for two reasons. First, they have been produced by the truckload by individuals and consulting firms seeking greater market share. Second, the market loved them and happily paid for the next "silver bullet" solution.

It's probable that the consultant to client relationship of the future will become more robust and be based on the consultant's ability to understand the client's business and provide skills, coaching and encouragement at a number of levels within the organisation. I suspect that we will see an end to the "report and run" and "answer seeking the right problem" style of consulting.

The management consulting industry will survive and probably thrive in the decade to come. Consumers of consulting services have become far more intelligent and demanding as the profession matures. Management consultants and consulting organisations are now, more than ever before, being held to account for real and demonstratable outcomes.

So, as I settle comfortably into my presbyopic era, I will watch, bespectacled, for the next fad of substance to come rolling along. Or maybe I'll get busy on this idea I have for a Harvard Business Review article.