CONSULTING MASTERY

THE ABILITY MYTH: BEING GOOD IS NOT ENOUGH

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 4

By Cindy Tonkin

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Consulting Mastery was published in 2003, and written in 2000 - 2001. There are examples of recruitment literature from websites which have disappeared or been changed to reflect changing culture, values and context. I haven't updated the quotes. Please take the examples as illustration – for many of the organisations involved there has been a major shift since that time.

MAY YOUR GREATEST DREAMS BE REALISED

Excerpt from Chapter 4

Master Consultants match their clients' thinking filters

So Master Consultants work with their clients' values systems. But it doesn't end there. Good consultants merely understand how their clients think, and perhaps by accident, they think in the same way.

Master Consultants have the flexibility to think in the way their clients think, and to think in another way, their own way, which may not be exactly as the client thinks. They are not stuck in only one filter, but can think with different filters. This gives them freedom to work within the system, and to think outside the nine dots. This means they can frame things so clients understand, sell change more easily, and reduce their stress levels as well as their clients'.

Matching thinking patterns is not as hard as it may sound. Many of us choose our friends because our values match or because our thinking patterns match or complement each other.

Steve and Anne are business partners because they both believe the business they are in will create a better tomorrow. They create self-esteem programs for children. They are also business partners because they know that although they have this strong belief in common, they also carry out their business and their thinking in totally different ways. Steve is constantly noticing how things could change within the business — smoother ways to do the accounts, other options for talking with clients, new marketing ideas. Anne, on the other hand, believes 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. She and Steve are often in discussion about whether or not their business systems are working.

When they get with the client however these different thinking patterns are an advantage. Sometimes the client is itching to do something new and different. Steve points out all of the revolutionary, cutting-edge ideas that their programs bring to the education arena. Or perhaps the client is a little concerned about new technology. Anne points out what is similar between the programs they already have and how this program will integrate well within the current curriculum, or how it will allow them to carry out the same curriculum they've always done in a way that disturbs them least.

Steve says the difference between him and Anne is what makes them such a dynamic business duo. Anne disagrees — it is the similarities in vision and their shared commitment to making the programs work. They both agree though that they are going to change the world with their consultancy.

When peoples' thinking patterns do not match there is often great conflict. And it can be such a productive process. Anne and Steve fortunately know how to work with their thinking patterns. Soon, you will too.

Master Consultants understand the thinking patterns which allow them to agree and disagree with clients, and to effectively introduce change and new ideas to them.

Defining thinking filters

It all comes down to a particular perceptual filter to do with change.

Now the purpose of a filter, any filter, is to separate or block out some things and let others through. So an air filter blocks out dirty air and lets clean air through; a coffee filter lets liquid through, but blocks solids. A perceptual filter is similar, in that it allows certain perceptions or impressions of the world through and blocks others.

The simplest example of a perceptual filter is the glass half-empty, glass half-full perceptual filter, often called optimism and pessimism. The optimist looks at a glass with water in and says it's half full. Their optimism filter determines how they see and make sense of the amount of water in the glass. The pessimist's filter also determines how they understand the amount of water in the glass. The same glass they would say is half empty. Both of them are right, because both are reporting the contents of the glass according to how they see, hear, feel and understand the world.

Figure 4.3: What is the relationship between these things?
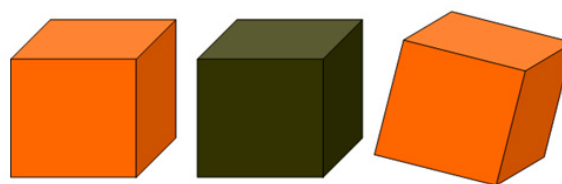
Martin Seligman's work on learned optimism showed that the way we see and describe the water in the glass can have a significant impact on our psychological reaction to the world, our career prospects and our ability to get ahead (Seligman 1991).

Our perceptual filters have a profound effect on how we interact and act and how successfully we influence our clients (or not).

Thinking patterns relating to change: the relationship filter

The particular perceptual filter I'm interested here can limit how people approach changes in their environment, and determines how they sell or buy change. Since consultants' key charter is to make change, introduce change, and ultimately make it stick, this filter will recur throughout this book. Perceptual filters are also called 'metaprograms'. Much of the work in this next section is indebted to Woodsmall (1988 a, b, c) and Woodsmall & Woodsmall (1998).

Let me give you some examples of the changes consultants need to implement. Accountants need to influence clients to change their spending, record-keeping or budgeting behaviours. Landscape architects influence clients to change how they tend their gardens. Image consultants influence clients to change their spending and grooming routines. Management consultants influence clients to change their management style, their strategic thinking patterns, or their recruitment techniques. Although we each sell a service, the longevity and effectiveness of our consultancy pivots on our ability to introduce change and make it stick. That's why the perceptual filter relating to change is so important.

Before we go any further, so you can understand where you fit in the scheme of things, take a moment to look at Figure 4.3 (go back one page) and ask yourself what the relationship is between the three things. Write down your answer before reading any further.

The answer is: _____

Here, in a nutshell, is a summary of the perceptual filter you will have used to evenbegin to answer that question.

The diagram in Figure 4.4 shows the relative incidence of the different filters, in a block graph. It also shows the type of response each type has to the relationship filter question. The responses are on a continuum, with four basic ways of answering the question.

One end of the continuum shows responses highlighting the differences between the objects, and responses at the other end highlight similarities.
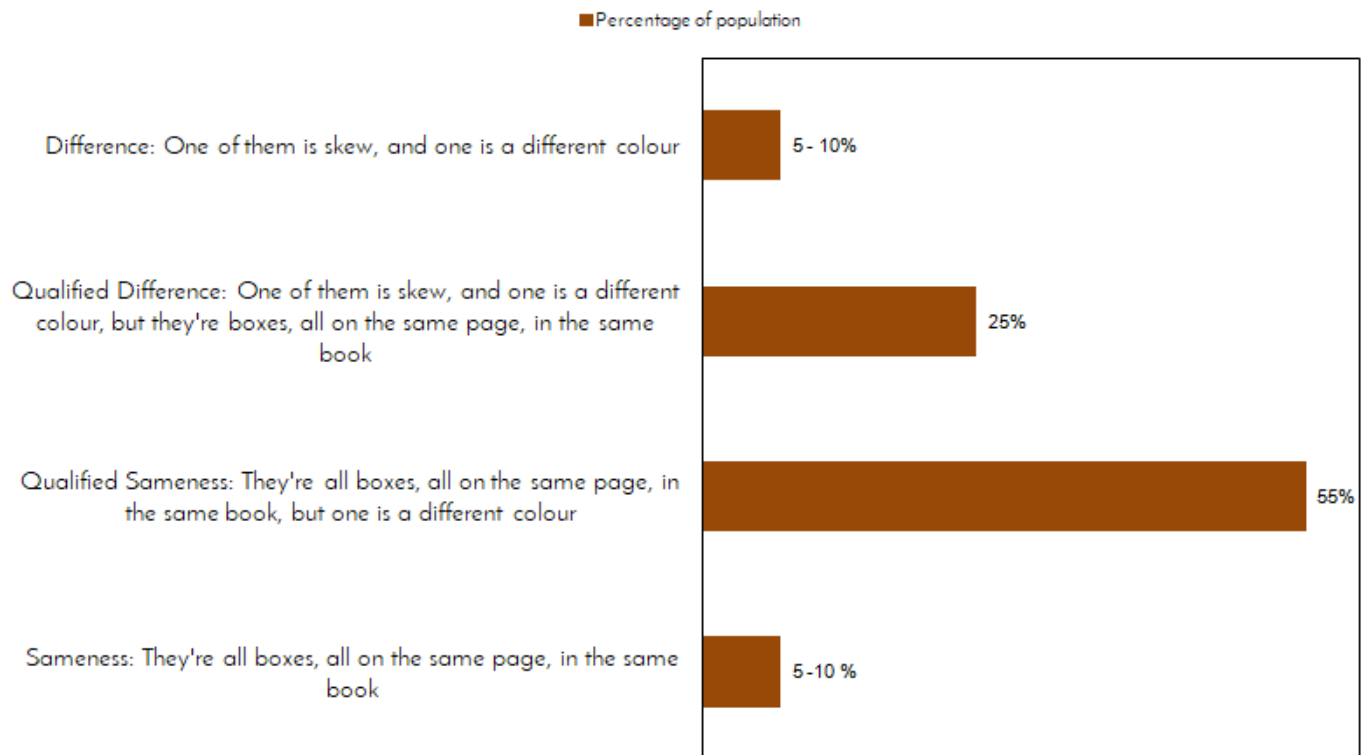
If you answered the question 'What's the relationship between the three things' as if it was 'What's similar about them', then in this context you have chosen to sort or filter the world by sameness. Examples of a sameness filter answer would be:

- They are all boxes
- They are all in black and white
- They are all on the same page
- They are all the same size.

If on the other hand you answered it with the differences between the three things, then you have chosen to sort or filter the world by difference. Examples of this kind of filter are:

- One of them is skew
- One of them is darker than the others
- There is an imperfection in the printing of one of the boxes.

Figure 4.4: The change filter continuum (after Woodsmall 1988c)

■ Percentage of population

Category	Percentage
Difference: One of them is skew, and one is a different colour	5 - 10%
Qualified Difference: One of them is skew, and one is a different colour, but they're boxes, all on the same page, in the same book	25%
Qualified Sameness: They're all boxes, all on the same page, in the same book, but one is a different colour	55%
Sameness: They're all boxes, all on the same page, in the same book	5-10 %

You may also have answered in combination — pointing out the sameness, and then the differences, or vice versa. These filters are common too, and are known as qualified sameness (sameness, then different), or qualified difference (difference, then sameness).

Qualified sameness answers include:

- they are all boxes
- they are all in the black and white
- they are all on the same page
- they are all the same size

and, but, except…

- one of them is skew
- one of them is darker than the others
- there is an imperfection in the printing of one of the boxes

Qualified difference answers include:

- one of them is skew
- one of them is darker than the others
- there is an imperfection in the printing of one of the boxes

and, but, except…

- they are all boxes
- they are all in black and white
- they are all on the same page
- they are all the same size

On the surface, this seems a simple distinction, somewhat like the glass half-full, glass half-empty phenomenon. And that may seem an ordinary result, so give me a few more moments to explain the implications of the sameness and difference dichotomy — called the change filter.

What the change filter tells us

What makes the change filter interesting is that when you take these different views of the world and put them together
it highlights:

- totally different ways of approaching and absorbing change
- different time frames for how long change can and should take
- different styles of how people buy changes (and how they sell them).

Consultants of every discipline are involved as change agents — whether it be changing the way people keep their receipts, the way they get to work through roads and bridges, or the way they organise their companies.

Francie is a management consultant. She enjoys being a consultant because it means she has the opportunity to work in a few different organisations, on different sites every few months. She is excellent at analysing organisational problems. She can walk into any area and within a few days come up with a list of serious issues they are facing —just by talking to people, observing their working patterns and nosing around their records. She is constantly looking for what doesn't work.

Francie works in a consultancy with about 30 other consultants, which is fortunate, because although she's fantastic at discovering what needs to change, she's not very good at implementing the changes. She tends to sell the new systems to the clients as cutting-edge, different, exciting, new and innovative.

Her clients, however, don't want to hear that — they don't want radical change. They are

organisation, other consultants implement and sell the client on changes. Francie creates the need, and moves on to the next assignment.

Francie is typical of many consultants, as we will see. As we begin to examine the four change filters in more depth you can begin to place yourself, your clients and your colleagues on the change-filter continuum. Please be aware that the filters will be contextual, and we will all have default settings. It is usually harder for us to do one end of the spectrum than the other, and in certain contexts we will shift around.

They're all similar

So at one end of the continuum are the sameness 'sorts'. These people see the similarities, and they want the world to stay the same — in general they do not like change. They may have difficulty adapting to it.

When you ask them about the difference between what they are doing now and what they were doing a year ago they cite the similarities — even if they'd turned their life upside down (not that it's likely that a sameness sorter would turn their life upside down on purpose — unlike a difference sorter). They would tell you they work for the same organisation, have the same equipment, work with the same type of client and work with the same colleagues. They wouldn't necessarily mention that the building has moved, the decor has changed or that they have a different boss.

Sameness sorters are often very nice people because they love to look for similarities, and

find what people and ideas have in common. They are great rapport builders. Some sources estimate that at their most radical, and in an ideal world, sameness filterers like to change jobs every 15–25 years (Woodsmall 1988c, p. 26; Woodsmall & Woodsmall 1998).

Working with the sameness filter

Sameness filterers love to hear words like: same and sameness, continuity, keeping what works, what things have in common, preserve and maintain. These are the key 'sales' words for change.

When you deal with a client with a sameness filter preference, use these words. Emphasise how your consulting assignment will be consistent with the past. Point out what will be maintained, preserved, 'tweaked' and evolved.

Your approach must be consistent, and it's helpful to have it as an almost preserved-in-stone, tried-and-true strategy.

There are some basic differences

These same words switch off the difference filterers at the other end of the continuum. They want the world to change, and they prefer big, revolutionary change. These people at their extreme may find it difficult to build rapport as they're constantly seeking difference, not sameness. The definition of rapport — getting on with somebody, seeing eye-to-eye, being in harmony with them — is to reduce the differences and increase the similarities between the two parties. It is for this reason most sales people look for what they have in common with you before they try to sell you anything (see also Cialdini 1993).

Words that are music to the ears of clients with a difference filter are: difference, radical improvement, revolution, cutting edge and radical.

Difference filterers constantly reorganise and update and improve things. From the point of view of the sameness filterers, they fix things that aren't broken.

Difference filterers are often excellent people to bring in towards the end of the planning phase for any project. They will be able to pick holes in any plan, and fixing this makes the plan stronger. However, they can be dangerous in the early phases of a project because they tend to criticise young ideas, so nothing gets off the ground. They like to change jobs often and soon — probably every 6 to 12 months.

Just check out the keywords from the recruitment literature for Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) (see http://www.ac.com). They are already likely to prefer to sort by difference, because they're in the technology industry. The bolding is mine to demonstrate the key words that appeal to the difference sorters:

> 'wide **variety** of **exciting** work, working on **different** assignments for a **variety** of clients, **new, exciting** business ideas… enjoy the **thrill and challenge of the new**…it's about **constantly learning**… identifying and creating **cutting-edge opportunities** to develop and **transform** the e-Marketplace, **leading-edge solutions** and technologies…develop **innovative**… solutions… **reinventing** industries, businesses and even [us]'.

In their war for talent Andersen go all out for the difference vote. They are looking for difference filterers, who can see what's wrong with a system and fix it. People who are difference filterers are exceptionally useful in information technology because they constantly want to reinvent and update technology. It also takes a difference filter to test new changes adequately (because they're constantly hunting out what doesn't work about the new changes before users find them).

Browsing the web pages of Australian organisations such as AMP, the Commonwealth Bank and the Department of Health (each known for their longer-term, more dependable, sameness-style behaviours as organisations), the most striking thing is their lack of words like different, exciting or cutting-edge.

Take for example the Commonwealth Bank, talking about their three-year graduate program. Sameness sorters appreciate long-term graduate programs — of course, for them it's not long term. For a difference sorter three years is an eternity:

> Throughout the three years you will have many informal opportunities to **build your knowledge** of the business and **demonstrate your readiness to progress** to new challenges. In addition we encourage graduates to pro-actively seek other learning opportunities…By the end of the three-year program we expect graduates to be appointed to management positions. However, this will depend on available vacancies, your **performance** and your suitability to fill role and business requirements.

Working with the difference filter

When working with a preference for difference, point out what is radically different, exciting, cutting edge, never before done and revolutionary about your project. It will be useful to improve your approach as you work with the client — they will appreciate you being different, flexible and unpredictable.

They're all the same but different

There are two more areas on the continuum (Figure 4.4). Let's look at the qualified sameness filterers first. These people answer the question about the picture of the boxes by pointing out the similarities between the objects and then the differences (they're all boxes, but one is crooked). They essentially say things are 'exactly the same but different'.

Ask them about the relationship of their current job to what they were doing last year, and they'll tell you they're in the same organisation, doing the same thing, except now they have a totally different client base, or the building has changed, or their boss has changed.

It is said that the qualified sameness filterers make up about 55% of the world (Woodsmall 1988c). They want the world to remain relatively the same, and will change jobs, they say, every 5–7 years. In their language they will use a lot of comparatives: 'it is better, there is more, there is less, it is basically the same, it is almost the same, it is the same except…' They like to hear words like: more, better, the same except, evolved, less, gradual, evolutionary, but and although.

The way Cap Gemini Ernst &Young describe their services contrasts with Accenture's. Much more qualified sameness, they use keywords like improve, better, gain advantage and, a favourite sameness word, sustain. They have time to focus, compared to Accenture's blurb where there hardly seems time to aim before shooting. Again the bolding is mine.

> Cap Gemini Ernst & Young offers services that **focus** on…From improvements in production and distribution… to **better** reporting and quality control, clients develop road maps that help them gain **competitive advantage** over rivals and **sustain** that advantage **over time…** you will need to be mobile, flexible and committed..

Working with the qualified sameness filter

When working with qualified sameness, point out the consistencies, and then the minor improvements or differences between your project and any other change efforts they have been through before. Make sure they understand that you will work with things as they are, and make adjustments to improve.

They're different, except for this

The final group on the continuum is the qualified difference sorts. They make up 25% (Woodsmall, 1988c) of the population.

They will look at Figure 4.3, and firstly point out that there is an odd one out — skew or a different shade. Next they accede that they are all boxes, all in a line, all on the same page — whatever is similar about them.

Comparing last year's job to this year's, they'll mention that there's a new boss, a new set of phones, a different set of clients, and then that it's with the same organisation in the same building.

They like change and variety and dislike stable or static situations. Change doesn't have to be revolutionary, but it must happen. Qualified difference filterers would prefer to change jobs every 18 to 36 months. They prefer words like new, different, changed, and unusual.

The recruitment literature for McKinsey is more subdued, and in fact the idea of change is not so strongly touted. They say: 'No two engagements are alike…develop and disseminate state-of-the-art management practices'.

At PriceWaterhouseCoopers they say, 'You'll be exposed to a diversity of industries, technologies and clients.' These are qualified difference filterers in action.

Working with the qualified difference filter

When working with qualified difference, remember to point out to the client what's going to change in relationship with the past, what's different and exciting about it, and then how it will maintain what they have already been trying to do until now.

When the consultant and the client respond to change differently

A large number of consultants are difference or qualified difference filterers. Many clients are sameness or qualified sameness. This is a generalisation, of course (and is therefore only true most of the time!). Consider the average length of assignment for a consultant (1 day to 3 years), and the average length of 'assignment' for a classic client: in corporate organisations, it's usually from 2 years to 30 years. Just in the length of assignment there's a few clues to the preferences in this filterer.

Here are some of the difficulties the difference filterers create for themselves: they like to build elaborate models with subtle distinctions, like to argue, point out counter-examples and why things won't work. Sometimes they are blind to obvious similarities, and want constant change.

Their clients, who may be more sameness sorters, have these limitations: they want to know how things are like what they already know. They may like to simplify things and collapse distinctions, because they don't like complexity. They prefer general principles and dislike exceptions, and are sometimes blind to obvious difference. They prefer routine, so for example they enjoy sitting in the same seat and following the same schedule every day. They will call in a consultant because they can't cope with change — change is crisis. They will stay with the same consultant once they have chosen. The consultants however will prefer to change client frequently, want to use different techniques every time, and will always be trying to re-invent the wheel.

Identifying the client's change filter

Before you can diagnose your client's thinking filter, you'll first need to diagnose your own (see earlier in this in chapter). To find out theirs, ask:

- What's the relationship between your job now and your job one year ago?
- What's the relationship between this manager and your previous manager?
- What's the relationship between your current home and your last?
- How long have you held this position or lived in the same home?

Record the answers to these or other similar questions.

Chapter summary

Master Consultants are aware of their clients' values systems and thinking filters, and their approach to each client is tailored to each of these. On a certain level, it is the Master Consultants' ability to play these mental and emotional flexibility cards which allows them to truly understand their clients, their needs, and their ideas. These are the true abilities which count for Master Consultants. Let's find out now how ability works within the ability myth.

About the author – Cindy Tonkin

Cindy Tonkin is the Consultants' Consultant.

She is a management consultant with more than 20 years experience.

She specialises in soft skills for clever people, and has a niche with data analysts. She runs several consulting brands, improvises, creates visual art and hangs out with her cats in Newtown, NSW Australia.

Cindy's first book, the **Australian Consultants' Guide** helped more than 6000 consultants set up their business.

Cindy gives consultants and managers tools to make doing business with people easy. She is one of the best-educated NLP-trained consultants operating in the business environment, with masters-level qualifications from the Université de Paris VIII and a First-Class Honours Degree from Sydney University. Cindy has worked for big consultancies such as Accenture and KPMG and boutique consultancies like her own. She has truckloads of practical, on-the-floor experience implementing organisational change from Chief Executive to Supervisor Level.

Her clients include major consultancy firms, public service organisations and Financial Services companies with internal consulting forces. She has written a fleet of books on how to make consulting businesses work more effectively, and how to be a better consultant.

In this century all of Cindy's clients have been repeat or referral business, a testament to her good work.

Cindy writes regularly for publications like Mortgage Professional Australia and Executive Excellence magazines. She has been featured on Radio 2GB and ABC Radio, in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Sun-Herald. She is a sought-after keynote speaker on a range of soft skills topics.

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