

CONSULTING MASTERY

THE ABILITY MYTH: BEING GOOD IS NOT ENOUGH

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 1



By Cindy Tonkin

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Thinking patterns

Different people think differently – this we know. Take for example optimism and pessimism: is the glass half-full or half-empty? Understanding a situation optimistically or pessimistically is a choice we can all make, and at the same time it's a habit we can follow or break. In NLP these filters are known as metaprograms.

Approaching the world with a 'glass half-full' approach creates a particular lifestyle and opportunities for improvement and confidence. The 'glass half-empty' approach can lead to different experiences. Master Consultants need to be able to recognise such patterns in themselves and their clients, as we shall see.

Options and procedures patterns

One such filter or metaprogram is the options and procedures filter. This describes and explains how people approach task structuring. At one end of the continuum are those who approach tasks from an options filter, and at the other end, the procedures filter.

People with a preference for options like to do things a different way each time. They are good at developing new procedures and alternatives. You can pick an options filter by their answer to a question such as 'Why did you engage your last consultant?' They'll answer that they liked the way they presented, or that their materials looked

good, or it felt right when they met, or their industry association recommended them. In other words, they answer as if it's a 'why' question.

At the procedures filtering end of the spectrum, people enjoy following procedures. They are good at doing the task 'the right way'. They are motivated when following a procedure, and usually good about completing it. When asked the question, 'Why did you engage your last consultant?' a procedures filterer will tell a story about how they came to do what they did, or they give facts. They don't talk about choosing or about options. They'll say, 'Well, I went to the industry website, and then I asked around my friends, and I got them to give me a presentation, and then I engaged them'. Or, 'I asked my finance manager to find someone, and they came back with these guys'. They respond not with why but how they chose.

The options/procedures filter corresponds in part to the Myers-Briggs Typology Indicator (MBTI) Judger/Perceiver dimension. The MBTI is in turn based on the works of Carl Jung. In the general population, options filters comprise about 40%, procedures filters 40%, while the rest (20%) operate both filters (Woodsmall 1998).

The downsides of both ends

Now there is a downside to both patterns of thinking. Consultants working on options filters can be too concerned with the theoretical and not enough with the practical applications (they already know the answer, so doing the

working out is trivial). To them, giving a client procedures to follow is spoon-feeding. Because they don't follow procedures, they may end up reinventing a new wheel for each task instead of taking a ready-made wheel off the shelf.

Conversely, consultants working on procedures filters can apply a given formula superbly, but cannot generate a new formula. They think they understand something when they can use a procedure to solve it. As clients, they expect consultants to provide them with procedures. Procedures clients will call in consultants if it's the next step in the procedure, or if the procedures they have are not working.

Appealing to both ends

Master Consultants adjust the language they use so they communicate more directly to the receiver regardless of their filters. People working on options programs for example like to hear words such as possibility, choice, option, reasons, other ways, alternatives and the other right answer. Procedures thinkers prefer to hear words like procedure, right way, proven way, only way, known way, correct way, how to.

Balancing the two thinking styles gives flexibility in structuring a task

Martin Ashford's survey highlights the need for consultants to balance the two ends of the options/procedures spectrum. The Master Consultant's skill in being able to be structured and procedures-oriented allows things to move forward in a predictable manner. And this needs to be balanced with enough options filter to take advantage of good opportunities that may arise, to develop novel ways of approaching the task if the procedure doesn't work, and to develop ongoing procedures.

No two clients are the same, so a consultant cannot afford to be too strongly procedures driven – if the procedure fails they may become stuck and not know how to proceed. Nor can they lean too much toward options, re-inventing and never following a procedure more than once. And yet they will be on the options path of continual improvement – always trying to do better than the last time. Aspiring Master Consultants will know their own natural style and make the necessary conscious adjustments. The blend of thinking options and procedures provides the basis for 'skill in structuring the task'. Without it, projects can stall, or worse, abort; with the right blend Master Consultants can take advantage of the opportunities and still complete the project!

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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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