



# ISSUES AND TRANSPARENCY

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In the world of consulting few assignments are executed without encountering issues that must be overcome in order to navigate to a successful project outcome. Some issues can be anticipated whereas others arise unexpectedly, some issues may originate from irregularities within internal consulting processes whereas others may be driven by the client organization or changes in the external environment.

Issue handling will require a carefully crafted communication approach and a fundamental question that often arises relates to the level of transparency to be demonstrated towards the client. Good judgement will be required as either saying too much or revealing too little may lead to negative consequences. The culture of the client organization may also play a role. Some clients prefer a hands-on approach when it comes to issue handling, whereas others are quite the opposite and don't want to hear about problems.

Whilst drawing an issue to the client's attention demonstrates an honest and

open approach, it is likely to invoke concern and may result in negative perceptions. In general, we would therefore prefer to deal with issues that are internal to the consulting process behind the scenes. This practice is not unique to consulting, and is applied in many service industries where the aim is to deliver a seamless client experience.

*A commercial aircraft has many warning lights in the cockpit connected to the numerous technical systems operating on board. If every time a warning light illuminated the captain would make an announcement informing his 200 passengers there would probably be hysteria on flights every day. A warning light in a cockpit tells the pilot that he needs to take action. Minutes later the issue will usually have been resolved through the adjustment of flight controls or through the use of an auxiliary system. Only if the issue can not be resolved and it is established that it will affect the progress of the flight is an*

*announcement usually made.*

A team delivering a consulting assignment has a similar choice to make. An internal issue that can be resolved, relatively quickly and with high certainty can usually be handled as an internal matter without alerting the client.

But in cases where the client organization will be impacted by the issue, where the client's participation will be required to arrive at a resolution, or where it is established that there will be compromises to the expected results a greater level of transparency will be required. A good relationship is a no-surprises relationship, and often the earlier that issue-related information is communicated the better. This was echoed in the comments of a senior project manager working in the aviation industry.

*Last year I supervised a project performed by a consulting team. We had a mixed experience working with them.*

*Whilst the quality of their work was good, their ability to make timely deliveries was somewhat haphazard. During the project we would ask them how the work was progressing and they would say that everything was on track. The following week they would tell us again that progress was good. But then three days before the deadline everything would suddenly not be on track and we would be facing a two week delay. We found this frustrating. As a client we understand that issues come up in projects but we need better communication than this. If the*

*consultants had approached us earlier we could have adjusted our plans to give them more time and prepared our organization to absorb the delay with minimal impact.'*

Communication around the issue handling process requires a balanced approach that considers both impacts on project commitments and reasonable measures to optimize perception and the ongoing client relationship.

Keep internal matters internal, but when it becomes apparent that there will be client

impacts, prompt communication will usually constitute the best course of action. Well seasoned clients know that issues arise from time to time and will measure you according to your behavior in these situations.

Be clear when describing the issue, outline potential impacts and present a well-constructed resolution plan. Holding back until the situation has become extreme often creates greater frustration of a more serious nature, which has undermined many consultant-client relationships.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Samir Parikh is a principal business consultant, practice manager, and consultancy CEO with over 25 years of industry experience. In 2000, Samir founded *SPConsulting* a global management consulting firm specializing in organizational strategy and change management.

With a track record of projects conducted in more than 50 countries the firm works closely with companies that are transforming into consulting-based organizations, delivering solutions and professional services in highly competitive environments.

## FURTHER READING

Samir is the author of *The Consultant's Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons. This book provides a comprehensive guide for the practical implementation of consulting skills by professionals working in consulting and professional-services-related disciplines.

The book contains additional guidelines, examples and use-cases to support readers in implementation of consulting techniques, as well as practical tips and lessons-learned from real consulting engagements.

