

FM Consultants Tip #1

“Can I hear YOU now???”



The old sayings, “I can’t hear you” or “Can you hear me now” are good for fun, but not for business. Consultants make their money by solving their client’s problems in a way that means success for them. We are in a client-centric business where what we think and say has to resonate with what really works for the client.

Of all the non-technical skills a consultant must have, listening is the most important. And there are many ways to listen. Listening is actually a two-way street that is passive for a while, and then is active for a while. Our first task when meeting with a client is to do a preliminary assessment – either in advance (preferable), or real-time. I think the assessment might have several aspects.

The first is to try to get an understanding of what the client knows about their stated problem or need. The sooner you can determine if this is a client that “knows” what they don’t know, or is a client that “doesn’t know” what they don’t know, you can start developing a strategy to help them. Using good listening skills while probing for answers or knowledge will get to the root of the problem faster.

When asking questions to determine what the client really knows about their situation, I advise you to focus more on open-ended questions, and less on closed-ended questions. For example, a closed question might be “Do you have a good space planning process in your organization?” If you get a “Yes” or a “No” response, you still don’t know anything about their process. Instead, you might ask “Tell me about your space planning process, and how you measure it’s effectiveness to meet your organizational space needs over time.” Hard to answer this with a one word response!

By asking a series of open-ended questions, you will get a clearer understanding of what they really know. If you think they “know” what they don’t know, then you are likely moving into a scenario or options strategy, where you are helping them choose a solution path that fills in their knowledge gaps and solves their problem.

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If, on the other hand, you feel they don't know what they don't know, then you are likely going to move into a discovery state with them to determine what are the parameters impacting a solution path, the controls that have to be met, and the scope of solution that is feasible for effective implementation. You are testing their interest and capacity to implement an effective, rational solution to the now-defined problem.

Listening carefully along the way will also help you understand how the client's perceptions and expectations impact their decisions, justifications, and confidence in the chosen solution path. You may need to modify either or both to align them with a realistic result.

There are excellent references on developing your listening skills. Do some self study and then practice with a friend or associate to find the best way to modify your client engagement process in a manner that best serves them, and therefore leads you to solid referrals and future consulting business.

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