

InnerActive Consulting Group, Inc.'s "Business Advisor" Audit

*If and When You Need a Business Advisor,
How to Find One,
And What We'll Probably Do After You Get in Touch*

We have a firm opinion, that people should learn how to help themselves and so solve their business problems. We believe that if you provide a person with the information he or she needs to solve a problem, in most instances they can solve it.

Thus, before rushing off to retain any business advisor or consultant, look for the solution to your problem right here. Determine what kind of problem you're facing.

Problem 1: You don't know what you want to do or what needs to be done.

Problem 2: You know what you want to do and what needs to be done, but you lack the necessary skills to do it and cannot take the time right now to acquire them.

Problem 3: You know what needs to be done and you can even do it, but you have other urgent priorities, and wish to delegate the task to a specialist.

These are three very different problems to resolve.

Towards Solving Problem 1

To solve Problem 1, we will work to help you define what needs to be done, including a complete breakdown of tasks to be completed, people to be involved in completing them, and dates by which they need to be accomplished. In this situation, you are purchasing several things:

1. Help in clarifying what you are trying to do;
2. A complete list of what makes sense to do given your goal and limited resources;
3. An education, so that in the future, you can either do some of these things yourself or be clearer about what any consultant or business adviser needs to do and how they should do it.

This process is the most comprehensive for our involvement. Here you are paying both for an immediate benefit and for education from which you will benefit later. Thus, make sure you understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. Ask lots of questions, pay close attention, and take notes. If you don't, you are not getting your money's worth.

Towards Solving Problem 2

If you lack certain skills and are retaining us for these skills, ask yourself whether you'll need such skills in the future. If this is a one-time only problem, by all means retain us to solve it, learn what you can, and follow our directions to achieve success.

If you'll need the skill again, however, (but cannot spend the time fully to acquire it now for yourself), regard your work with us as educational as well as immediately problem-solving. Acquiring this knowledge is critical because the cost of not improving the situation can be very high – especially if the problem occurs again and you still lack the skill. So do it now!

One of our concerns about our much-valued clients is their frequent failure to pay close attention not only to what we are suggesting or doing but to why we are suggesting or doing this. Every consultant is by definition an instructor or educator.

Once you see the importance of what we are doing for the success of your organization, you may want to invest some of your time in upgrading your skills in these areas.

Towards Solving Problem 3

Here is where you are best equipped to get the most from us. Why?

You already know what the problem is and how to solve it. You will therefore be able to approach us as your consultant with at least some understanding of our problem solving skills. You will be able to more accurately assess what we say and why we say it. As a result, your decisions (for remember, we are only an advisor) should be correspondingly better, more precise. Too many people do not get the best results from us because of their lack of knowledge about what any consultant or advisor can do, too much vagueness about their own needs, and lack of understanding of the consultant's problem solving skills. This won't happen to you!

What's Next?

Once you've decided what you need, you must find the right person who will do it. Here are some suggestions:

Call us. We are a seasoned business advisor group. We execute expertise in the following areas: Strategic Planning; Executive Coaching; the selection, benchmarking and evaluation of sales teams; Transition to more Complex Selling; Team and Individual Communication Issues; and Development of Managers and Leaders. If these interest you, start here. Even if these are not the problems you need to solve, call us anyway. We have contacts in several fields and belong to two national consulting organizations that may have the problem solving skills that you need.

If you want low cost and have the time to deal with your life being more difficult and perverse, try the following: Contact the business school at your local college. Often times, students are looking for projects and will help you with yours. In addition to professor led projects, which should have no cost to you, there are usually internships whereby you get a student or students to work on your problem for a semester or longer. This can be a volunteer status, volunteer plus expenses or fully paid internships. In some cases you will get fresh new ideas for solving problems, the downside is a lack of practical industry experience.

More ways to Find Business Advisors:

Ask local college professors if they do consulting. Many moonlight. But be wary of professors. Academic personnel often lack practical problem solving experience. Ask for evidence of what they've done (and how it worked), not just what they've talked about in class. Our recent encounters with academic consultants have confirmed my belief that most have severely limited experience.

Use SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives. This program of the Small Business Administration matches retired executives with people with business problems. There is no limit on the number of times you can return with your problem, and you generally do not need an appointment in advance. You can just walk in. Check with your local SBA office for the nearest SCORE counselor.

Monitor your friends and colleagues, particularly those in a comparable business. Find out who's doing well. Ask if they use Business Advisors. Write down the information as you discover it. People, particularly in a competitive industry, can get tight-lipped about who's helped them climb the greasy pole to success. When they are more communicative, take advantage of it.

Ask your professional association for the names of business advisors or consultants active in your field.

Note the names of business advisors and professionals whose articles appear in your professional publications. Scarcely an issue of a business publication goes by these days without articles concerning problems that you also face. If the article did not have complete follow-up information, ask the editor for it.

Ask your other business advisors, directors or accountants. All professionals maintain contact lists and are constantly swapping client leads or information.

What To Do After You've Got Some Leads For Potential Business Advisors

Begin by calling the consultants in whom you are interested. Before going further, you need to find out if they are taking on new clients and if they work in the areas of your interest. Only if these two conditions are successfully met should you investigate further.

If they are interested, you need to send a letter designed both to provide information about you and your project and elicit further information about the consultant and his work. Remember: good consultants are judging you as much as you are judging them. We know, for instance, just by looking at the way the envelope is addressed and how the letter appears (to say nothing of what's actually in it) whether this is a serious client-prospect. Prepare your approach accordingly. Good consultants are very persnickety with whom they work.

Here's what should be covered in your letter:

Part 1: Information About You and Your Problem

- Be clear about what you want to achieve
- When do you want it?
- What factors differentiate your situation from others? Are there, for instance, certain constraints that apply in your situation?
- What have you so far done to deal with the problem? Consider including selective supporting documents.

Part 2: Information About the Consultant And His Track-Record

- Ask if the consultant has helped other similar organizations and with what results. Ask the consultant to send you relevant information on these successes or at least references for you to contact.
- Ask how the consultant handles a new client in terms of meetings, information needed and fees.

A good consultant expects you to be prepared on the points in the first part of this letter. A good consultant is prepared for your questions in the second part.

Evaluating the Responses

Let me tell you something about how to evaluate consultants: it begins the minute you contact the consultant, both by telephone and letter. Keep notes about the following:

- How long did it take for the consultant to respond to your call or letter?
- How did the consultant respond to you and in what way? Was it clear about what they needed from you and why they needed it? Does what they said make sense to you?
- Did you get the success-verification information you requested?
- Did the consultant respond to you in a reasonable, professional and timely fashion?

Rest assured that if you are disappointed on any of these points (when the consultant is presumably on their best behavior), things will get worse later. If you have a bad feeling, politely terminate the connection. A short note to the consultant saying that you are not going to proceed now is genteel.

What We Would Be Doing With You

Here's how we would be handling this contact. We will:

- promptly respond to your request for information;
- reassure you (with hard data, not words) that we have experience solving specific problems like yours;
- give you precise information about how we handle client-assessments;
- ask you questions to determine what your problem is and how seriously you want to solve it. We'll want to determine if you will do what is necessary to solve it and if you have the requisite means, including budgeted funds.

Expect us to be courteous, but pointed. Our questions may appear brusque to you, but you can be assured we need accurate and detailed information to make a realistic assessment about whether yours is a problem:

- we can solve;
- you want to solve;
- you have the means to solve.

We want to know if this is a situation which will give us at its conclusion a success we can market, or is merely one fraught with frustration and aggravation which neither of us need.

If and only if these questions are satisfactorily answered will we offer to work with you. After all, we want to succeed as much as – if not more – than you do. Please Note: Pay close attention during this assessment process. Just going through these steps you'll learn a good deal about your problem and your likelihood of solving it.

Will You Pay For the Initial Meeting and Assessment Process?

Let's put it this way: whether you pay for this process before or after you become a client, you'll probably pay for it.

For a lengthier (one-year) retainer contracts, we give one free hour to client prospects but even the cost of this time is built into the subsequent contract. For shorter-term engagements, we charge for all the time we use including any travel expenses. This is common.

If we are rendering judgments on issues of interest and value to you, we have a right to charge for our time and knowledge. Expect it.

Making Your Decision

You know what we are looking for in assessing you. So, what do you do now about deciding if it would be beneficial to work with us? That's where the following questions come in:

- Did you like Voss Graham? He will be working closely with you. He will be candid, direct and may occasionally seem pushy. It helps if you feel aligned with him.
- Did you trust him? Did you understand his professional judgement? Did his recommendations and comments seem reasonable and measurable to you?
- Do you have the capabilities to do what he advises? Perhaps his advice is good in the abstract but not given your circumstances. Is Voss understanding about you and your situation? Is he client-centered? Is he speaking to you?
- Does Voss inspire you with a sense that this job can and will be done? Is he realistic about the obstacles and knowledgeable about what you can do, in your unique situation, to overcome them?
- Is he trying to impose a rigid or generic structure on you, or is he tailoring his methods to your situation? You will find that the only time a process is not tailored to your situation is if you insist on a specific process with no customization.

If you are uncertain about Voss or any of our consultants, in relation to any of these points, raise them at one of your meetings and assess the answers. If you are still uncertain, we are probably not the consultant or business advisor for you.

Understanding The Good Advisor

Good business advisors are seasoned. They understand that solving a problem is not only a question of utilizing technical information. It may also call for psychological skills, political astuteness, persuasion techniques, flexibility, and the constant ability to assess a situation, take into account what is happening, and change their advise as needed. Such skills do not come overnight.

There is much more to a good advisor than merely knowing where to find and how to use problem-solving information. Are you confident that the business advisor you are considering bringing into the heart of your business is so seasoned and that he wants you to achieve success as much as you do?

If so, engage him. You are, of course, taking a risk, but it is one that should pay off with a stronger organization bringing your service or product to the attention of your prospects or buyers in new and better ways to the advantage of both you and the people who need what you're selling.

And if you don't feel this way about this consultant?

Keep looking. Having a trusted advisor is too important to entrust to just anyone who has a title of consultant. The key is to have a business advisor that shares your vision and is willing to work hard with you in achieving that vision – as we know we would.

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