CHAPTER 1

Conditions for a Successful Intervention

Stacking the Deck in Consulting Is Not Cheating

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Consulting techniques and interventions don't succeed or fail based on the atmosphere of the client, the self-esteem of the consultant, or the phase of the moon. They succeed or fail based, largely, on whether conditions conducive to their success or failure are in place.

The bad news is that is an implacable dynamic. The good news is that we control the dynamic, the client does not.

The reason that we've seen barely coherent approaches often triumphantly resound to the huzzahs of repeat business and the prized jewels of our beloved methodology fall to the ground and become lost amidst the macadam is that the *conditions* that obtain actually produce victory or defeat. Centuries ago Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, "I have often reflected that the causes of the successes or failures of men are dependent on their ability to suit their manner to the times."

How well can you massage, manage, and maneuver the environment so that your intervention is ideally suited to the conditions of the times?

Above all—and I hope this thought will resonate and carom throughout the book—we cannot afford the conceit of falling in love with our own methodologies. Our best six approaches to the sales process, strategy facilitation skills, conflict resolution technology, and assorted other proprietary (or simply beloved) approaches are not the point. They are merely means to an end, and that end had better be the improved condition of the buyer.

No buyer ever said, "Our people don't understand their roles in terms of our strategic intent any better than before, but that consultant had a fabulous nine-box grid, superb computerized reminder lists, and a wonderful facilitation technique." What that buyer says is, "Let's never do *that* again!" and "Is it too late to get our money back?"

EDUCATING THE BUYER

Prior to the sale you probably had to educate the buyer about need, value, metrics, and other aspects of your proposal.[1] However, that education doesn't end with the signed contract or the buyer's check clearing the bank. You must constantly educate the buyer about the needs, progress, and accountabilities of the consulting project. That begins with the first meetings when you're establishing a relationship and ends with . . . well, it never really ends.

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> *Ultimata:* Your methodology is not nearly as important as the client's *receptivity* to support methodology. If achieving the latter means modifying the former, then do so. The equation does not work in the other direction. The client will never love your methodology as much as you do!

1. See the other books in this series for the "pre-sale" education, especially *Value-Based Fees* and *How to Acquire Clients.* Also see my book *How to Write a Proposal That's Accepted Every Time* (Kennedy Information, 1999).

Here are the fundamental educational processes you should utilize during and after the sale to ensure the success of your implementation. It doesn't hurt to keep a physical checklist of these requirements so that you can ensure you don't skip a step or miss a beat.

Five-Step Client Education Checklist

1. Establish Crisp Objectives. Create very clear business outcomes for the project. Translate "inputs" (your methodology or the tasks required) into "outputs" (the improved client condition stated as business outcomes). Examples:

Input or Methodology	***Business Result or Objective***
Conduct focus groups	Determine employee commitment to new compensation plan
Facilitate strategic retreat	Create top-team consensus on nature and direction of the business
Serve as expert witness	Enable client to defend against lawsuit successfully
Coach general manager	Enable senior executive to delegate to subordinates, focus on acquisitions

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Crisp objectives will also circumscribe the project, preventing the dread "scope creep," which afflicts many consulting interventions like a fungus growing out of control in the dark and moisture of vague agreements.

2. Establish Clear Accountabilities. A consulting project is not something you "do" to the client. It's something that the two of you mutually engage in—a collaboration or partnership requiring both of your talents, vantage points, and hard work. My proposals *always* include a section called "joint accountabilities," meaning that there are responsibilities uniquely mine, uniquely the buyer's, and uniquely shared by us. Examples:

> *Buyer:* Make certain documents available, provide access to key people, visibly support the initiative at agreed on events and junctures, provide personal feedback, and so on.
>
> *Consultant:* Provide periodic reports and updates, facilitate and manage all

interventions as agreed on, adhere to confidentiality/non-compete agreements, and so forth.

Mutual: Inform each other immediately of anything learned that could materially affect the success of the project (e.g., the consultant learns that two key officers are resigning in the next month, or the buyer learns that there will be a major acquisition or divestiture).

Ultimata: The buyer knows about making cars, selling insurance, or creating brands on the Internet. You know about consulting. As you educate yourself about the buyer's business, why shouldn't the buyer be educated about yours?

3. Co-Opt Key Sponsors. Find the people who will make this project succeed or fail internally. Then cajole, romance, subvert, twist arms, and/or influence them in any way possible. These formal and informal sponsors are usually among the following:

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- Buyer's direct reports
- Buyer's boss
- Key union officers
- Managers of key functions (e.g., sales)
- Top producers
- Key channel partners or agents
- Buyer's informal advisors
- Senior financial officers
- Large, influential customers
- Influential vendors

Enlist the buyer in helping you make the case to these people, always remembering that "What's in it for me?" will be their explicit or implicit question, and that question needs to be answered completely and satisfactorily.

4. Prepare the Buyer for Wins and Losses. Every project I've ever been engaged in has had its share of false starts, setbacks, and "whoopses." Maybe that's because I'm just not that good. But maybe that's because such yin and yang are inevitable. If the latter is true, then you'd better prepare the buyer (and yourself).

Spell out for the buyer what may go wrong and why. For example:

- People who feel threatened will probably complain
- A lack of sponsorship will create doubts about sincerity
- The message will have to be repeatedly reinforced, not spoken just once accompanied by a banner in the cafeteria
- Senior people must "walk the talk"
- Unforeseen events will undoubtedly intervene, seldom for the better
- Eventually, there will be conflicting priorities to be resolved by the buyer

The more you can prepare the buyer for these eventualities, the better he or she will be able to see, even after the rose-colored glasses are discarded.

5. Make It Clear That Metrics Are Everything. If the two of you aren't jointly measuring progress at frequent intervals, then no good can come of it. If things go poorly, the buyer will feel surprised and mistreated. If things go exceedingly well, the buyer will wonder if you really were needed at all.

Some metrics can be objective and some subjective. The key is that you and the buyer agree on how you'll measure progress, and you both agree that the measurement device is fair. Some examples:

Objective	***Subjective***
Weekly sales reports	Talking to salespeople and customers
Quarterly financial results	Monitoring the customer complaint line
Monthly turnover	Nature of grievances brought to HR
Customer retention	Customer feedback on support
Rejects and quality data	Vendors stop complaining

The best measure is one on which you and the buyer can agree, to quote Bob Mager's famous line, that you know it when you trip over it.

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Ultimata: Don't allow any buyer to stipulate, "I'll just know that we've achieved it." Despite the Supreme Court justice who said he'd know pornography when he saw it, consulting results are seldom so unequivocal or fascinating unless you specify what it is you're both looking for.

Educate the buyer in a manner that will be conducive to the success of your project. If you don't, no one else will, so you don't exactly have a lot of backup here.

MEETING KEY PLAYERS

Since the sales process can easily involve no one other than the buyer, it's important to spend some time on techniques required to meet and influence the key players described above. Remember that these are often people who will be threatened, indifferent, callused from prior experiences, cynical, sycophantic, and/or insincere.

Other than that, they're a fine bunch.

You must always keep the following absolute truth in mind when seeking to influence "key others": People will only willingly change their own behavior (motivation, as opposed to mere movement when ordered to change) when their own rational self-interest is affected. It is incumbent on you to identify, understand, and appeal to that rational self-interest.

Ultimata: Consultants have no organizational power, and attempting to utilize the buyer's hierarchical power is cowardly (as well as ineffective). Determine and explain why it's best for others to change, not why it's best for you for them to change.

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CASE STUDY #1

Dealing with the CEO of a $600 million subsidiary outside of Chicago, we agreed on a project to improve the collaboration and teamwork of his direct reports. The problem was that, as is so often the case, his "team" was really a committee. See Appendix A, Figure A.1, for a visual comparison of the two.[2]

"How would you know they have moved to true teamwork?" I asked, desperately seeking a metric.

"Oh, I'd just know," he assured me.

"Well, what's happening now that convinces you they aren't there yet?"

He listed the following:

- "They don't share resources.
- They argue over turf issues and who gets credit at my management meetings.
- I have to play referee constantly.
- Their own reports follow their lead and don't cooperate with their counterparts cross-functionally."

I simply reversed these and had fabulous metrics, for example, "If you no longer played referee at meetings or in your office, and they shared their resources and budgets as needed without you making the Solomon-like decision, then they would be a team."

"Yes," he said, "they would be a team and you would be a miracle worker." It turned out that he was right on both counts.

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2. Appendix A is a compilation of many of my "process visuals," which I use to educate buyers and derive consensus from key players. For more examples and details on use, see my book *The Great Big Book of Process Visuals, or Give Me a Double Axis Chart and I Can Rule the World* (Summit Consulting Group, Inc., 2000).

Work with the buyer to determine who the key players are; then develop a plan *to influence every one of them positively.* This won't always work, of course. You'll have entrenched hard heads and purely personal agendas at work. But if you make the effort, you'll convert more than your share and tremendously soften the environment to accept the kind of interventions the client requires.

Here's a road map for identifying and influence key others.[3]

The Road Map to Influencing and Educating Key Others

1. Identify the Key Players Whose Support (or at Least Non-Opposition) You Require. The criteria can include

- Respected by large numbers of people
- Controls resources essential to the project
- Possesses expertise key to your successful implementation
- Has caused the success or failure of similar endeavors in the past
- Possesses or controls information key to implementation

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There's nothing wrong with putting these criteria in front of the buyer and generating a list.

2. Set Priorities. Not everyone is equally important, and you don't have all the time or energy in the world. After all, the project has to begin before every duck is in a row and every cat has been taught to dance. Determine, with the buyer, who can absolutely derail the project, as opposed to those who can simply put sand on the track.

Begin with the derailers, and get to the sanders as time permits. Usually co-opting the former will drag along the latter.

3. Create a Tailored Plan for Each. Usually the worst thing you can do is to get everyone in a room and tell them what you're going to do for them, which will

3. Lest you think this is the buyer's sole responsibility and resides with the buyer as a result of my own "joint accountabilities," think again. The buyer has all kinds of political, cultural, ego, and turf constraints, which actually makes it easier for you to exert influence than for the buyer to do so in many cases.

make the IRS seem genuine and empathetic by comparison. Instead, devise a way to approach each based on self-interest. Which of them are anxious for new assignments, for new resources, for more freedom, for greater recognition, for healthier life balance, and so on?

Do your utmost to merge the buyer's business objectives with each individual's personal objectives. For example, if a given manager has long held that she's working too hard, demonstrate how the project will enable her to put in a forty-five-hour week and reach the same results she now achieves. If a union leader has qualms about losing control, show how the project's plan for delegation will actually push decisions to front-line levels.

Find out what makes them tick; then provide the fuel.

4. Keep Them in the Loop. The greatest consulting implementation sin I've encountered is keeping potential supporters in the dark, even after initially good meetings and budding relationships. Keep them aboard by

- Developing steering committees and advisory boards with their participation
- Copying them on reports, updates, and summaries sent to the buyer
- Inviting them to key buyer meetings
- Frequently asking for their suggestions, input, and critiques (it's far better to get a critique to your face than behind your back)

5. Establish and Monitor Their Accountabilities. Gain agreement from the buyer and the others about their involvement and responsibilities, and monitor the progress. In that way, you have frequent and regular excuses not only to interact, but to remind them of the support needed. *Hint:* The more specific the accountabilities, the harder they are to shirk or ignore.

Ultimata: Passion is a thin line between love and hate. If someone virulently opposes your project, finding his or her "hot button" (self-interest) will convert that zeal to your support. Remember that logic makes people think, but emotion makes them *act.*

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CASE STUDY #2

Once upon a time, before the Messiah-like return of Steve Jobs, Apple Computer created an initiative to promote certain computer products zealously. The sales force dutifully complied—by low-balling their sales forecasts, attempting to ensure that they would maximize their bonuses by exceeding those same conservative forecasts.

Sales management dutifully complied—by knocking still more off the estimates, thereby preventing any overly zealous sales forecasts from preventing the sales managers from exceeding their goals for incentive pay.

Production dutifully complied—by creating an inventory completely consistent with the ghastly low sales estimates, and woefully inadequate for the actual demand once every salesperson and sales manager proceeded to burst through his or her incentive goal with unprecedented sales.

The result was a travesty, with Apple unable to meet orders, those orders being lost, and market share precipitously dropping. The CEO was canned, heads rolled, and Jobs returned.

Never doubt the efficacy of having the key implementers on board and communicating with all other key parties. Lack of such preparation nearly sank Apple, and it can surely sink you in any client system.

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AVOIDING ENVIRONMENTAL AND POLITICAL LAND MINES

There are people opposed to any change in the status quo. The importance of recognizing and dealing with them is two-fold: First, they may undermine or deflect your project. Second, you may be receiving "false positives" from them if they are a resource for your information gathering (e.g., part of an interviewing process).

The first rule is to never assume that people are somehow "damaged." The myth that *all* people resist change simply isn't borne out by observing daily corporate reality: People adjust to traffic jams, unexpected management moves, customer unpredictability, power failures, and a myriad of other unexpected but clearly survivable potential detours to daily progress. People will change, but not all of them and not always readily.

Ultimata: Don't mistake your own competence and chaste persona as the view that others will see. They will be biased by past experiences, company folklore, private interests, and bad hair days. Take active and aggressive steps to defuse land mines and win converts.

Here are the "likely suspects":

The Vested Interest

This individual truly has reason not to change. The current state of affairs maximized his or her well-being, and a comfortable nest is being threatened. An ideal example is the sales manager who sees the current compensation system as ideal both to effectively manage the salespeople and to squeeze every last penny out of his or her personal incentive bonus scheme.

You can deal with a vested interest in one of two ways:

1. *Provide an Even Greater Interest.* Demonstrate that your proposed change might lower the downside, but will greatly enhance the upside or will sacrifice some at-risk commissions while guaranteeing a larger monthly base. Vested interests often become locked into position because they haven't taken the time to look at alternatives once they get comfortable.

2. *Clearly Show That It's to Be Either Supported Change or Uncontrolled Chaos.* That is, the present condition is untenable, and they might as well work to create a new one that is most beneficial for them, or it will happen by default. If the compensation last year was 34 percent of revenues and 15 percent above industry averages, show that the system is going to change and no force in the world can stop that, since we're talking about irate shareholders and outraged executives. Given that inevitability, why don't we work together to create a tolerable new scenario?

The Conniver

The conniver has nothing against the change, per se, but sees an opportunity to barter or gain something in return for his or her support. This is the person

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holding Marvin Gardens in Monopoly™, preventing you from controlling all the yellow properties. In business, an example would be the IT manager who ingenuously claims that it would take months to change the sales reporting system to reflect new commission structures. Of course, she has also suggested that receiving frozen funding for new servers would greatly ease the burden.

Rule of Thumb: If the quid pro quo attempt is, indeed, for something that will materially assist in the implementation of the project, try to work it in. If it's a matter of crude ransom instead, then go to your buyer and relate this: "I have good news and bad news. We've cleared every obstacle to implementation but one. However, that one obstacle will require your direct clout to remove, since the issue is about corporate policy and funding."

Ultimata: You can't deal with all resistance in the same way. The *cause* of the resistance should dictate the preventive measures. The key is to be prepared for all of the types so that the preventive measures can be rapidly deployed. The cardinal sin—the fatal trap—is to allow resistance to undermine the buyer's belief in the project. Once that happens, the land mine has become a neutron bomb.

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The Dilettante

Finally, you will sometimes encounter an intellectually gifted and interpersonally challenged manager who is adept at pointing out theoretical and conceptual "problems" which other managers—including your buyer—may react to with a combination of cautions and time-consuming attempts at preventive actions and counter-measures. His goal is nothing other than to demonstrate intellectual prowess, thereby safeguarding or improving a position as key advisor or heir apparent.

This can be the worst kind of resistance, since there is no clear opposing interest involved. In fact, it's rather like passive-aggressive behavior in that the resisting party is actually cloaking himself or herself in "the best interests of the project" by highlighting the "problems." You will usually have to overcome this person in a group meeting by employing the following techniques:

1. *Focus on probability and seriousness.* The conceptual claims usually will not stand up under pragmatic reality and, if actually encountered, can be easily overcome. So demonstrate that they are improbable and/or non-fatal, and show that the organization actually overcomes such issues every day in a variety of areas.
2. *Establish preventive and contingent actions quickly.* In other words, if the concern is that customers might react poorly if not brought into the loop well before your project is implemented and their feedback invited, suggest a rapid email or faxed customer survey and training of the sales force to deal with any customer reactions that are encountered on the spot. Show your buyer that there are actions immediately feasible that obviate the need for any delay.

The Cynical and Uninformed

Probably the greatest volume of resistance will come from the otherwise neutral folks who have seen (or think they've seen) a bushel of boondoggles before and who have no reason to suspect that this one will be any different. Those who are on the fence can be easily swayed by the skeptics.

Every project plan should have a strong communications aspect at the front end. Don't simply march through the building. Begin with some proper and moderate communications which alert the staff to the following:

- Why the project is important (the current condition to be improved)
- How you will be implementing the project
- What the results are hoped to provide
- What's in it for them
- How you will all know that progress is being made
- What recourse they have to ask questions and track that progress
- Who they might be encountering in that endeavor

Some projects demand confidentiality, but they are the minority. Let everyone know what's going on and you'll create an atmosphere of disclosure and trust rather than one of secrecy and cynicism.

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Ultimata: In your proposal, build in "joint accountabilities" which include the buyer's role in communicating the project's intent and the responsibility of people to cooperate. After the signed proposal reaches you, start immediately to enforce that accountability with the buyer. A little support early is stronger than heavy support too late.

WADING RIGHT IN: TEN STEPS TO LAUNCH

Despite my warning of possible land mines, I am strongly advocating that you "wade right in" to the project. I call this "throwing cement at the project," meaning that you want to get started, begin influencing the environment, become known, and get paid (most of all) before the resistance has a chance to erect fortifications.

The preventive measures above are meant to be naturally deployed in advance and/or as resistance is encountered. But the watchword is "forward."

Here are my guidelines for beginning the implementation of any project. You might choose to change the sequence, but I think the template will work over 90 percent of the time.

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Ten Steps to Launch Without Being Sunk

1. *Reaffirm the proposal content with the buyer.* The buyer has signed your proposal or contract. As you begin the implementation, talk to the buyer to reaffirm what each of you is accountable for and how you're going to proceed from that point.

Ultimata: Use a checklist to launch any substantial project. Don't take anything for granted. A client once said to me, a month after launch, "I had assumed expenses were included in our fee!" The good news was that he was in error. The bad news was that I had to point that out a month after the fact.

CASE STUDY #3

When beginning a project for what was once Merck's animal health division, I found that the focus group participants were virtually mute. Finally, I was told by someone, sotto voce, over coffee: "The sales director put the word out: He's picking us deliberately with the understanding that we won't say a negative thing about his leadership." How bad was his leadership? Well, he demanded that people give up a weekend night to attend "social functions" without their spouses so that he could enjoy the limelight.

I went to the division president and told him what was going on. He said he'd have a word with him. I cautioned against it. "Let me do random interviews around the division and pull together focus groups ad hoc at sites I visit without a schedule submitted through his office." We agreed on the plan and, in one rapid-fire week, I gathered all of the information I needed before the sales director could anticipate my next stop (he couldn't intimidate the entire division).

He later protested that I had "rigged" the damaging feedback and offered his own counter-testimonials about his behavior. It was then too late for him, but it had nearly been too late for me.

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2. *Begin doing something.* The sooner you actually do something—anything—the quicker the client is committed and any chance for "cold feet" is defeated. Schedule some meetings, observe the work environment, meet key people, whatever it takes. But show immediate movement and create the momentum that will overcome the current inertia.
3. *Find and meet the key players.* As discussed above, there are influential people to meet and sway, either to support the cause or to prevent them from becoming resistance islands. Find them quickly. The reason is that it's hard to dislike someone who's taken the time to come to your office and ask your opinion, but it's relatively easy to dislike a "faceless" consultant being bad-mouthed by a colleague. Put a face behind your name and a firm handshake behind your introduction.
4. *Begin co-opting resistance.* Once you have a sense for where the resistance originates, implement the preventive and contingent actions noted above.

Don't assume it will dissipate through lack of energy or will be blunted by the mere force of your competence and commitment to the public weal. Fight them on the beaches.

5. *By-pass islands.* Having said that, don't get too bloody too early, and most critically, don't allow progress to slow because of islands of resistance. If the entire sales or financial department is resisting, that's one thing; but if a single financial manager is the naysayer despite her colleagues' support for you, then allow the skeptic to defend her island and flow around her. You can always come back later with reinforcements, but the odds are that, if you're successful, she will have been starved out. *The key here is forward motion. Don't allow minor resistance to stall your plans.*
6. *Periodically meet with the buyer.* A critical shortcoming of consultants is that they abandon the buyer.[4] Meet with the buyer every two weeks, at least, to demonstrate progress and discuss any obstacles. Problems are much more tolerable when confronted in the context of overall progress and victories. *Never* see the buyer only when you have problems to report. After the first couple of months, you may reduce the buyer contact to once a month, but that should depend on your own acceleration.
7. *Make your successes visible to the organization.* Use email, newsletters, house organ interviews, management meetings, and any other relevant mechanisms to ensure that the maximum number of people are acquainted with the progress. (The grapevine will surely be taking care of your problems and "defeats.") Cite clear examples, which will help eradicate those remaining islands of resistance. Also, embrace the internal people, which brings me to the next point.
8. *Share credit, or even bestow all of it.* The more you make the implementers responsible and the reason for success, the more you maximize your chances of everyone jumping on the bandwagon. The more the consultant is the sole wizard, the more you imply that "You were too stupid to get this done without me." Take a low-key role and accentuate the role of internal partners. Your support will grow like a fungus.

4. In larger firms, a "handoff" takes place, wherein the rainmaker (engagement manager) leaves and the implementation team takes over. That is a critical error, and one of the dumbest strategies that large firms employ.

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CASE STUDY #4

I had begun a project for Mercedes-Benz North America and the CEO at the time was an extremely intimidating executive from the German parent. He was clearly unhappy with his human resource people, and I was brought in to do things that they were incapable of in his eyes.

At a social affair for dealers which introduced our initiative, several HR managers approached the CEO with some suggestions, which he peremptorily dismissed or abruptly cut off. He then turned to me and said, "What would you do?" I quickly answered him with hard facts and solid suggestions.

He said, "Perfect! Why can't you think like that?!"—the latter directed to the HR contingent. The tension was so high that I thought a fire might break out. But I calmly said, "Actually, several of those ideas were from your people, which we all shared just before this function."

"Ah," he muttered.

Later in the night, the vice president of human resources said, "Thank goodness you're here. You'll tell him things we've been trying to get across for two years, but he'll listen to you." It was a perfect marriage for the duration of the project.

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9. *Illustrate closure.* When a portion of the project or a step in the plan is completed, blow the horn. Don't assume that everyone knows. Announce, diplomatically, that a key juncture has been reached.

Ultimata: Never lose the buyer's ear. Make arrangements early to meet frequently and on a schedule that is sacrosanct. If you ignore this, you deserve what you get, which will be very little.

10. *Visibly make mid-course corrections.* I've never been involved with a major project that played out exactly the way I had envisioned at the beginning. Don't hide redirection and regrouping. Let people know and explain why.

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This is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Be honest and people will trust you. Be secretive or disingenuous and people will suspect you're lying when you say, "Hello."

FINAL THOUGHT

Always make sure that you get PAID on time. This is no small aspect of effective implementation. It frees up your mind and makes tough calls much easier to face. If you do not get paid on the button on the date, go to your buyer immediately. Don't waste time with accounts payable. If some functionary is balking at your fee or terms, stop work until the buyer resolves the issue. I don't feel any project is under way unless I've been paid.

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