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The dilemmas of a consultant

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Safeguard your professionalism by recognising your strengths and standing firm in the way you conduct business

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Dr Berne Brown, in her recently released book *Rising Strong*, talks about what she terms the 'quicksands' that consultants often find themselves in. The following series of instances describe the various perilous situations she highlights.

I was invited by a client to help him sense, diagnose and arrive at the human issues his organisation was contending with and thereafter to intervene appropriately. As I went about discussing with his managers and understanding the reality of the organisation, I recognised that the task, if I was commissioned to undertake it, would be large and time-consuming.

Emotional Blinders

I presented my findings to the CEO and had a series of protracted meetings, both formal and informal, and in so doing invested heavily in terms of time and emotion.

When we were negotiating rates of the contract I constantly experienced my client cutting me down on rates, saying he could not afford a large fee. In my enthusiasm to gain the

contract as the client seemed to value me, and as I had invested time and effort, I was blind to the fact that my final bid and contracted rate was too low for the scope of the work. Sadly, I realised this only after I had been commissioned. Dr Brown terms such indiscretion 'Emotional Blinders.'



Loss Leader

In quoting for another project with a large client I systematically discounted my price, knowing well that I would lose money, especially since it involved extensive travel. Yet I

did this believing that my low rate would lead to future work that would be more profitable and eventually offset the loss.

Unfortunately the contract that I entered into did not extend further and I effectively lost out in the bargain. Dr Brown calls this approach 'The Loss Leader' syndrome.

Uncharted territory

A client invited me to work with his organisation ostensibly in the area where my strength would be utilised, yet after investment of time on understanding his organization, I realised that the task given me was in an area I was unfamiliar with.

Having committed myself to him and not wanting to appear incompetent I went after the business even though I had no experience in the area. Dr Brown terms this 'Uncharted Territory: I don't know what I don't know.'

Win at any cost

Many times I am so addicted to the thrill to win, tying my self-worth to gaining custom at all costs, that I not only devalue myself, I also become sub-optimal. This I recognise comes because, as Dr Brown says, I feel I need to 'win at any cost.' I tend to accept assignments of such nature because I believe my self-esteem will otherwise be hurt.

Defensive Pricing

Sometimes, when I have been pitched against another consultant by an existing client and not wanting to lose the business at any cost, I tend to protect my turf by making it difficult for the competitor to match my price, even if I have to take a loss. Dr Brown calls this 'Defensive Pricing.'

These are the five 'sinkholes' that I see myself getting into, and I am sure many other consultants also encounter similar pitfalls. Even though they are detrimental to our businesses, we allow ourselves to be compromised and thereafter regret our decisions.

The antidote to falling into such sinkholes is to recognise our strengths, appreciate our vulnerability and have the courage to confront the truth of who we are. We must assess our payoffs in acceding to requests and situations that compromise us and finally have the courage to stand by what we believe in for ourselves and for the manner in which we choose to conduct our businesses.

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