

Surrounded by management consultants? Speak up.

By [Anne Fisher](#), contributor April 11, 2013: 12:11 PM ET
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Anne Fisher has been writing "Ask Annie," a column on careers, for Fortune since 1996, helping readers navigate booms, recessions, changing industries, and changing ideas about what's appropriate in the workplace (and beyond). Anne is the author of two books, *Wall Street Women* (Knopf, 1990) and *If My Career's on the Fast Track, Where Do I Get a Road Map?* (William Morrow, 2001).

Here's how to respond when consultants are called in to impose 'solutions' without using suggestions from the real experts: employees.



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FORTUNE -- **Dear Annie:** I work as a first-line supervisor at a company that has been through three different restructurings in the past five years. Each time, a team of management consultants has been brought in to come up with solutions to our problems and, each time, they offer recommendations that are either unworkable or blindingly obvious to anyone who really knows the

business (i.e., us). Why? Because they either don't ask us for our suggestions, or else they ignore the information employees give them.

Now, it seems to be happening again. The current crop of "experts" is wet behind the ears, and they are certainly putting in long hours, but from what I can tell so far, they're concentrating on the wrong issues. I've complained to my boss about this, but he's drinking the Kool-Aid and doesn't want to hear it. Why do consultants operate this way, seemingly in defiance of common sense, and is it worth trying to influence the outcome, or should I just keep quiet and go along (again)? I'd love to hear what your readers think about this. -- *Invaded*

Dear Invaded: Your dilemma is far from unusual. In fact, Karen Phelan wrote a whole book about it. A former consultant with Deloitte & Touche and Gemini Consulting, Phelan has also held executive jobs at two **Fortune 500** companies, so she's been on both sides of this situation. Her book, *I'm Sorry I Broke Your Company: When Management Consultants Are the Problem, Not the Solution*, is packed with vivid examples of consulting gigs gone wrong and examines in detail why one-size-fits-all problem solving so often falls short.

"There are good consultants and bad consultants," Phelan says. "Good consulting is a combination of detective work, counseling, and in-depth industry knowledge." Such knowledge can really only come from experience. And the bad kind? "Bright, highly educated young kids -- and I know, because I was one -- who lack real expertise but who come in and impose a standard methodology they've been trained by their firms to use." Sound familiar?

In the second instance, consultants don't "find the root causes of a problem before they 'solve' it," Phelan notes. "This is where the counseling aspect [of good consulting] comes in. In lots of companies that are struggling, people aren't talking to each other, or they're not having the right conversations."

A frequent result: After the consultants have packed up and left, "no one knows what to do, because the right employees were not involved in designing the new strategy. So the only people who can put the recommendations into practice are more consultants." Sometimes, Phelan contends, this "cycle of dependency" is deliberate: "It leads to more fees."

Bad consultants often dismiss the concerns of people like you, Phelan adds, by saying that employees just don't like change. "Nothing could be further from the truth. People love change. Otherwise no one would ever go away to college, get married, have a child, move, or switch jobs," she says. "What people do not like is having questionable changes thrust upon them."

If you want to avoid that, this time around, you're going to have to speak up. "Usually, no one even tries to bring up information that's contrary to what the consultants think, because they just assume they'll be shot down," says Phelan. But -- and it's a big, crucial "but" -- how you speak up is just as important, if not more important, than what you actually say. When employees do try to influence consultants, they too often approach the discussion "by tearing down what's going on, saying things like, 'This is so stupid, it will never work,' and so on," Phelan says. "That will just get you tuned out."

Instead, she suggests meeting with the consulting team and putting your request to participate "in positive, constructive terms. If employees' input is taken into account, it will not only make the outcome better, it will make the consultants' job easier. Frame your suggestions not as criticism but as an offer to improve the process. It would be unusual for that to be ignored."

Phelan also thinks you should try to engage your boss again in helping you get your points across. "Your boss may seem to have drunk the Kool-Aid, but often managers feel it's part of their job to seem as if they have. So they put up a bit of a front," Phelan notes. And, unfortunately, the complaining you say you've already done may have made your boss even more defensive.

"Try reframing your concerns in a less hostile way," Phelan says. "Say something positive like, 'I just think this would work even better if we had some input.'" Not only are your ideas more likely to get a fair hearing, but a more upbeat approach is smarter politics, too: **Griping** doesn't make you look like a team player. Offering your help does.

One technique Phelan has seen employees use successfully: Put up a big flip-pad of paper or a white board" in some centrally located place in the office where everyone can see it, and write a particular issue or suggestion on it. Then leave markers or Post-Its there so people can add their own suggestions and comments. It's simple, but it gets everyone involved, and it's very visible." She adds that "the number of Post-Its or comments is a tangible gauge of how important each topic is, and how much engagement there is, from the people in the company who are closest to the actual work."

Good luck.