

Innovation's Triple Play: Curiosity, Networking & Fun

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As featured in:

ConsultantsOnConsulting

A section of the July/August 2009 issue of

CONSULTING MAGAZINE

Innovate or die! How many times have you cringed to hear that ominous business mantra? It seems to position the opportunity to modernize your operations as a dreaded ultimatum. We feel our clients and colleagues will be more inclined to leave the status quo behind if they recognize the cornerstones of innovation: curiosity, networking and fun.

Early in 2009, when optimism for the consulting industry was hard to come by, Cliff Consulting was given the unique opportunity to share best practices with two international firms with distinctly innovative business models.

Obifive is a Paris-based consulting, training, assessment, and coaching firm and WDH Consulting Group is a Northern California firm that coordinates Learning Expeditions and Strategic Expeditions for Europe's largest companies. WDH reached out to us while constructing a week-long itinerary intended to provide 15 of Obifive's senior members an opportunity to explore innovation in U.S. businesses.

The intention of including Cliff Consulting in the expedition was for Obifive to learn key ingredients of our successful model as a small, regional consulting firm that has thrived for over 35 years with very low turnover in consulting staff. But the result was much more exciting—as a group of three consulting company managers, we took the opportunity to reflect on Obifive's observations of American businesses, and discuss three key ingredients to running a successful and innovative business regardless of the industry or size of the firm—curiosity, networking and fun.

Curiosity: It Opens Dialogue and Creates Trust

As consultants, we often feel that asking questions might look like we don't "know our stuff." In fact, quite the contrary is true. Approaching each business problem with a curious mind creates healthy dialogue, builds trust, and opens a world of options and ideas. Weighed down by deadlines, client demands and



earnings reports, executives tend to forget the valuable life skill of curiosity and thus, their ability to innovate is hampered. In exploring the underlying ethos of these three uniquely different firms, we found a consistent theme: a willingness to adopt the Zen-like beginner's mind, ask fundamental questions, and through that process, enable others to see outside the box and work together to generate innovative ideas. The WDHB Learning Expedition model inspires curiosity in participants. The firm hosts structured, one-week programs for European management teams to visit a variety of businesses in the U.S., Canada, China, Japan, India or Russia. These expeditions offer European business leaders the opportunity to look at their internal company challenges through the lenses of foreign colleagues. Key components of each trip are daily debriefings and reflective workshops on the potential applications of observed business practices.

"Rather than a simple exercise in benchmarking, our programs provoke inspiring discussions among our clients and serve as outstanding team building exercises," said Pascal R. Baudry, president of WDHB and author of the book, *French and Americans, The Other Shore*.

Obifive made its commitment to curiosity evident by inviting half of its 30-person firm to travel to the San Francisco Bay Area and participate in a WDHB Learning Expedition. "Through these meetings, we seek the American source of growth and evolution through innovation," said Celine Lerenard, Obifive managing partner. "Our clients want to know what the new model of leadership looks like and how they can develop the skills to innovate." As they toured U.S. enterprises, the Obifive representatives became aware that an inquisitive approach to business requires a culture shift within many of their client organizations.

"In France, people at work are always serious, always thinking. I've noticed that Americans have open conversations at work," said Caroline Leroy, a senior consultant with Obifive. "We need to invest more time into asking questions of the people around us."

Leroy's comment underscored a core competency we take great pride in at Cliff—the ability to really listen. Our seasoned consultants, each with at least 10 years of project leadership experience, know that everyone—at every level—has an important perspective and appreciates being heard. We enter into each assignment with an open mind, collecting people's ideas and challenges without judging or solving them. The first two weeks are the most important in any client engagement. That's when consultants see most of the opportunities presented by the assignment.

Networking: Client Care Results in New Business Development

Obifive representatives expressed surprise at Americans' enthusiasm for networking, including the use of technological networking such as Twitter, Second Life and LinkedIn. While these new platforms have their place, we discussed the importance of keeping relationships strong through interpersonal networking, which constitutes the most successful business development tool for all three firms.

The value of sharing information and knowledge with our clients ("networking with a heart") may seem "old fashioned," but will be a critical way to stay in business as today's consulting industry becomes

increasingly commoditized. Everyone at the conference table agreed that strong personal client relationships are the foundation of each firm's business development success.

Twenty years ago, WDHB set out to be the embodiment of networking and created a new international learning experience for business people. By connecting European companies with colleagues and potential business partners all over the world, WDHB thrives from referrals and repeat business. For instance, over a five-year period, France Telecom sent 480 of its top 600 managers on Learning Expeditions.

The personal relationships and successful engagements that Obifive and Cliff develop with their clients pay huge dividends. Fully 80 percent of Obifive's clients and 95 percent of Cliff's clients represent repeat business. The firms work with leading companies in their regions—Obifive advises the top 40 businesses in France, such as UNESCO and Renault, and Cliff supports some of Northern California's largest employers, including Wells Fargo Bank, Kaiser Permanente and Blue Shield of California.



Additionally, Cliff recognizes the bottom-line benefits of providing internal opportunities for networking. We regard peer support as a simple matter of matching a consultant who is wrestling with a client issue with another of our associates who has faced a similar problem. These problem-solving sessions, along with bimonthly staff meetings, improve our client service and build collegiality among consultants who often function independently at their client sites.

Fun: Happy Staffers Are Enthusiastic Problem-Solvers

How does enjoying your job lead to innovation? Just ask the Obifive representatives who esteem the U.S. passion for work. "I'm amazed by the capacity of American companies to have fun at work and to be enthusiastic and proud of what they do," said Brigitte Sivan, Obifive managing partner. "In France, people have fun outside of work, but they do not think of bringing fun into the office."

We couldn't agree more. During the meeting, we told our personal tales of how much the Cliff team loves what they do. Our consultants have a unique opportunity for hands-on assignments that allow them to partner with senior managers and become members of their team. Since they are free of the big-firm pressures of travel, sales quotas, and leveraged staffing models, our consultants can truly spend their time at work getting things done alongside people at all levels of the organization.

Given their reputation as highly experienced, senior consultants, they also have the kind of access to decision-makers that contractors working through brokering "body shops" rarely get. This makes for a very satisfying and effective work-life balance, which, allows consultants to come to their assignments

invigorated and enthused. Cliff's consultants take advantage of our flex-time policy to travel the world, collect art, spend time with their children and enjoy Northern California's great outdoors.

Obifive's structure has the foundation to provide its employees with that same passion. Obifive shares our approach by empowering their consultants to work autonomously with clients, while management and staff handle the major business development, contract and administrative tasks.

And for a serious French firm, Obifive showed a penchant for whimsy in the origin of its name. "Obi" is a direct reference to *Star Wars* sage "Obi-Wan Kenobi" and "five" refers to the five senses. Obifive seeks to connect the intangible to the tangible.

Not to be left out in the fun category, WDHB ensures their Learning Expeditions offer more than a business perspective of the host country. The firm incorporates visits to museums, restaurants and entertainment venues in their expeditions so that clients like Obifive get the full flavor of the region they visit. In Northern California, that translated into a day in the Napa Valley Wine Country and an evening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for Obifive.

Our brief exchange with WDHB and Obifive reinforced our enthusiasm for networking, staying curious and keeping our consulting work fun for ourselves and our clients. We share our experience with *Consulting* magazine to encourage a renewed appreciation for the business and personal benefits these three ingredients can bring to all industries, including consulting.

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a project leadership consultancy based in Oakland, California.*

Bob Cliff founded Cliff Consulting in 1972.

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