Strong Opinions, Loosely Held

Idea In Short

Bring strong recommendations, not equivocation, because nobody pays premium rates for lukewarm advice. Then hold those opinions loosely: show your work, verbalize assumptions, socialize conclusions early and ask what evidence would change your mind. Conviction and open-mindedness together define professional judgment.

A Phrase Worth Adopting

The expression strong opinions, loosely held entered wide circulation partly through a Tim Ferriss interview with Marc Andreessen, the investor who created the early Netscape browser that made the internet navigable, sold the company for billions and then spent over 15 years investing in and guiding dozens of companies.1 The tension he names is universal for entrepreneurs and investors: be confident and persistent about your product without sliding into stubborn financial suicide. Every client-serving professional faces the same question. When do you stick to your guns, and when do you change your mind?

The Case for Strong Opinions

Management consultants are in the business of having opinions and making things happen. Clients do not pay for flip-floppy recommendations, the long pro-and-con lists garnished with on-the-other-hand. Nobody wants lukewarm advice at 250 to 600 dollars per hour. Consultants are not pundits, project managers or staff-for-hire, so anyone claiming the title should arrive with potential solutions rather than equivocation. After six to twelve weeks of assessment, you had better hold seriously strong views. In reality, professionals carry strong hypotheses before arriving on site, and great proposals hint at potential answers. Two weeks often suffices to sense the dysfunction, with the remaining time spent confirming initial thoughts, building broad client buy-in and planning the implementation phase to come. Confidence completes the requirement, because you must believe in your analysis enough to stand before executives and convince them to act. Leadership takes energy plus risk, and nobody will be more confident in your work than you. Does that make you 100 percent right? Absolutely not, which is where the second half of the phrase earns its place.

The Case for Holding Loosely

The paradox is real: you believe what you are saying, and you remain open to being convinced otherwise. Andreessen praises hedge fund managers for exactly this trait, describing them as the most open-minded people he knows, professionals who love hearing why they might be wrong and who will flip their position and reverse the trade when persuaded.2 Most people hate changing their minds. The best investors treat mind-changing as a competitive advantage, because the market punishes attachment to yesterday's thesis. Consultants face the same market in slower motion.

Mechanics That Make It Work

Four disciplines let conviction and flexibility coexist. First, stick to a process and show your work along the way. If the path to your conclusion is visible, you can unwind it without hypocrisy, backing the car up from a dead-end and taking the other avenue. Second, verbalize the assumptions. Every recommendation hinges on assumptions and constraints, so make them explicit and watch whether they break, change or betray you. Third, socialize the recommendation early. Consultants do not live at the company and do not know its history, and three or four hidden reasons may doom an otherwise sound idea. Vet conclusions with each individual stakeholder before the final readout, honoring the partner wisdom that you should never have a meeting in a meeting. Fourth, consider the time frame. One organizational design project delivered strong work in four weeks, won verbal agreement and then watched the client do nothing, an apparent failure, until word arrived four years later that nearly all the recommendations had been implemented. Strong opinions, loosely held, because sometimes the holding period is four years.

Teaching the Posture to Teams

Managers can institutionalize the balance rather than leaving it to temperament. In internal reviews, require every recommendation to arrive with its load-bearing assumptions listed on one page, so the loosely-held half has something concrete to grip. Reward the analyst who updates a position in light of new evidence as visibly as the one who defended a position successfully, because teams learn from what gets celebrated. Assign a rotating devil's advocate for major recommendations, giving contrary evidence a formal channel instead of relying on courage. And model the behavior personally, since a partner who publicly changes course when the data demands it licenses everyone junior to do the same. Cultures acquire the strong-opinions posture from watching, not from slogans.

Guarding the Inputs

Loose holding fails without honest inputs. Confirmation bias pulls everyone toward news, facts, friends and opinions that validate existing beliefs, so surround yourself with smart people you trust who hold the relational capital to say things you do not want to hear.3 Refuse to build an echo chamber of agreement. Watch your information diet with the same discipline, because every source carries built-in bias, including the ones you enjoy most. Know what you are consuming and deliberately add sources that contradict your worldview, eating the news vegetables alongside the sweets and snacks.

Honing the Judgment

The long game is pattern recognition. Learn to listen for patterns in logic, in organizational dysfunction, in business cycles and in management transitions, and think regularly about your own thinking. One question tests the whole posture better than any framework, and it belongs in every professional's weekly self-examination: what would I need to know to change my mind? If no answer exists, the opinion is not strong. It is merely rigid, and rigidity is what the phrase was coined to prevent.

- 1Marc Andreessen
- 2Hedge fund
- 3Confirmation bias

Summary

Strong opinions win engagements and loose grips keep them honest. Follow a visible process, name your assumptions, vet recommendations before the final meeting and audit your information diet for confirmation bias. The self-test never changes: what would I need to know to change my mind?