Not Knowing Is Fine

Idea In Short

A recurring pattern with junior consultants reveals an important distinction: not knowing an answer is genuinely fine, but failing to make any effort to find one is not. With near-infinite information available instantly, a highly paid consultant is expected to research, reason and reach out to a network before ever declaring defeat on a simple question.

A Pattern Worth Naming

A recurring scene played out repeatedly over a short stretch of time: a junior consultant hit a simple roadblock and, rather than reflecting on the problem or hunting for an answer independently, immediately replied with some version of "I don't know how to do that." The honest response worth giving back, however blunt it sounds, is simple: that is exactly what a search engine is for.1

Infinite Information, Minimal Excuse

The reply is not flippant; it is genuinely true. Near-infinite access to information exists today, with no need to buy a book, place a phone call or visit a library. A smartphone in nearly every pocket puts most answers within reach in under a minute, which changes what counts as a reasonable excuse for not knowing something.

The Leverage Model Cuts Both Ways

Consulting runs on a leverage model where more senior people's time carries real cost, and using that time wisely matters as much as using it at all. Constantly asking a manager for a checklist of exactly what to do next signals something concerning: a lack of independent rigor, weak internal thought process, or simply giving up too easily at the very first obstacle encountered.

Nobody Stops Digging Halfway Through a Hole

A few simple analogies make the underlying expectation vivid. Nobody stops digging a hole the moment the dirt gets denser; they keep digging. Nobody abandons a math problem the instant a step becomes unclear; they keep working it. Nobody gives up entirely the moment hotel wifi fails to connect; they troubleshoot until it works. Consulting managers, notably, are not meant to function as helicopter parents hovering over every small obstacle a junior team member encounters.2

Are You Earning Your Daily Rate?

Management consultants command premium daily rates, and that reality carries a genuine obligation: asking a question without having first attempted a reasonable amount of independent legwork does not clear the bar. The better instinct is searching for the answer, thinking the problem through carefully, and reaching out to a personal network only after those steps have already been exhausted. The real question worth asking constantly is whether logic, network, research skill and business judgment are being pushed hard enough, or whether effort is being abandoned too early.

Where Not Knowing Is Genuinely Fine

Clients hire consultants specifically to tackle problems that are ugly, complex, politically sensitive, persistent and cross-functional; if those problems were easy, they would already be solved internally without outside help. Several situations count as entirely legitimate not-knowing: asking open-ended questions during a client interview to build rapport and draw someone out, scoping a project's precise boundaries and defining what sits in or out of scope, seeking a genuine expert's judgment built from real experience, or being asked directly by a client something that, honestly, is simply not known yet.

Where It Crosses Into Lackadaisical

Calling a colleague's question dumb is never acceptable, but consultants are nonetheless held to a genuinely higher bar, given how much professional pride the field places on getting smart quickly on unfamiliar topics. Not knowing a spreadsheet formula, an approach to a specific problem, an unfamiliar acronym's meaning or a presentation software trick is completely normal; the expectation is simply that a person attempts to solve it

independently first before asking someone else to solve it for them.

A Habit That Compounds Over a Career

The habit of hunting down answers independently before escalating does not stay confined to a first job; it compounds steadily across an entire career. Senior leaders in any field are, almost without exception, people who got comfortable years earlier with sitting inside genuine uncertainty long enough to work through it, rather than reflexively outsourcing that discomfort to someone more senior. Building that muscle early, while the stakes of any single mistake remain relatively small, pays dividends disproportionate to the modest daily effort it actually requires.3

Investing in the Skills That Prevent the Gap

Recognizing a genuine skill gap and investing in closing it independently, buying a reference book, studying a technique, practicing a format ahead of an important presentation, reflects exactly the kind of initiative that separates a strong performer from someone who defaults to asking first. There is no shame whatsoever in not knowing something. The shame, if any exists, belongs entirely to never trying in the first place.

- 1Problem Solving
- 2Helicopter Parent
- 3Self-Directed Learning

Summary

Not knowing the answer is fine. Consultants are hired precisely because client problems are hard enough that easy answers do not already exist. What is not fine is failing to try first, since the tools to hunt down most answers sit in every pocket.