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When Will You Stop Talking?

Out of the mouth of babes, comes truth, raw truth. My eight year old son has the ability to uncover the truth in a way that embarrasses me and simultaneously, makes me proud.

Recently, our family took a tour of a restored opera house. The tour guide was pleased at the chance to show off her knowledge and offered to give us a private tour, on the spot. Her preamble started with the story of the founder of the opera house, how he acquired his wealth, and the previous uses of the building on the same site. She continued on for another 10 minutes, without moving a single step up the staircase towards the opera house on the third floor. Even worse, she didn't engage any of us in being a part of the experience. It was as if we were open, stationary receptacles for her knowledge. Finally, my son raised his hand. Delighted to be able to take a question, the tour guide stopped and said, "Yes! What's your question?" My son asked in a straightforward manner, "**When will you stop talking?**" He used a tone of voice that just as easily could have asked, "What's for lunch?" He had none of the impatience or rudeness that would have been imparted had I ventured the same question (Yes, I was asking myself the same question).

The tour guide gave a flustered response of "NEVER!" after which the words seemed to gush out of her at even a faster rate. She moved a few steps up the staircase, only to make us wait several more minutes before reaching the second floor. By the time we reached the theatre, her rambling had diminished the experience.

As I lay in bed that night, thinking about the day's events, I realized that my son had given me a wonderful gift. As a consultant and executive coach, I automatically fall prey to the Consultant's Curse: the need to hear oneself talk. When I talk, there's no room for my client to interact with me. Worse yet, there's no room for me to listen. In order to produce the best results, my client should be engaged in the process, as curious as I am about what we might find together to improve the client's condition. And that means opening the space for that interaction to happen.

I once knew a tour guide in New York City who gave great walking tours. Herman was the king of walking tours. But it wasn't just his knowledge that made him stand apart. It was how he engaged his paying clients. Always, always, he asked his audience to use their imagination, to go back in time, to view a certain city block as it would be 100 years ago. So we were actively participating in the process of seeing the world in a different way. And that's exactly what I want to have happen with my clients.

Unfortunately, clients have suffered from my succumbing to the Consultant's Curse. After giving a workshop where I invited a colleague to join and give critical feedback, she recounted about a section of the workshop where I talked too much before starting an exercise. I still remember her words: "Stop talking and let the participants just have the experience. Then you can talk during the debriefing of the exercise." Wouldn't it have been so much richer if our earnest tour guide had shown us the opera house right off the bat and then helped us fill in the details of what we were experiencing? Or asked us questions to trigger our curiosity?

In the end, our need to explain keeps us from jointly discovering new knowledge and truth. So the next time I see a client starting to look at his watch, or squirm in her chair, I will remember my son's question, "**When will you stop talking?**"

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