



**A Human Resource Perspective on the
Dance of the Seven Veils**

A HUMAN RESOURCE PERSPECTIVE ON THE DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS

The mythical dance of the seven veils has been characterized in vastly different ways since its first references in biblical times. The two most popular characterizations of the dance has the removing of the veils leading to a not-too-revealing conclusion of the dancer while the mystical version and the lifting of the veils brings the observer closer to a fuller awareness and knowledge. The veils in this scenario remove the illusions and misperceptions.

A modern day example might be the growing numbers of the world's population who have shifted positions and now consider climate change a problem for everyone to do something about even if it is just to use less water and electricity. The 2007 Nobel Peace Prize was shared by former United States Vice President Al Gore, a leading climate change advocate and a United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of which China is a leading member for their work to promote global awareness of the man-made impacts on climate change.

The biblical version of the dance of the seven veils did not end well for everyone. The ruler became so enamoured with the dancing beauty he proclaimed she could have anything in the kingdom. The dancer after consulting her mother asked for some poor fellow's head on a platter which to save face was delivered. This might be what some executives think should happen to a staff member who invites the boss to a bad vendor presentation which leaves them no wiser or knowledgeable at the end than they were at the beginning. This leads us to wonder how many others have left a vendor's presentation feeling that you just witnessed a dance of the seven veils that, at the conclusion, left you no closer to what you thought you would learn than you believed at the beginning of the talk.

Our version of the dance of the seven veils is more akin to the mystical view of the dance where each veil removed brings us closer to a fuller awareness, understanding and the knowledge that allows an informed, strategic decision to be made and the organization's strategic agenda fulfilled. In this view, the veils are the illusions or misunderstandings of what strategic issues the vendor's solutions will address and how well they fit with the organization's key priorities, how the vendor will work with the buyer and what the benefits will be.

Our experience as purchasers of vendor's services and as providers of services to buyers has led us to our own version of the dance of the seven veils that ends in enlightenment on the part of the prospective buyer not only in terms of services offered and deliverables but in the discovering needs the buyer has not yet contemplated he had.

Our two versions of the dance of the seven veils will lead to two very different results. For the moment we will call one version "Traditional" and the enlightening version, "Partnership".

Chart 1: Two Sales Approaches

Traditional	Partnership
§ Transaction Focus Selling	§ Demonstrates Collaboration Skills
§ Lacks Industry Awareness	§ Quick study of client industry
§ Incongruent with Organization	§ Fits the Mission, Values & Culture
§ Lacks Strategic Thinking	§ Helps Develop Strategic Objectives
§ Vendor Proposed Solutions	§ Develops Solutions with Client
§ Multi-level Roles Not Clarified	§ Clarifies Roles at Multi-levels
§ Lacks Influence Skills on Client’s Behalf	§ Possesses Influence Skills for Client

Our experience proves that the change model employed by organizations seeking global change or large systems changes like organization culture can be applied successfully to a sales model that leads to partnerships between customer and supplier. This model views change as a process and stages leading from awareness to understanding to commitment that achieves sustained improvements that accomplish important objectives. Initially, there needs to be awareness of the change and why it is needed before there can be understanding and commitment.

People need first to be aware of the need for change and what the change will be and then to understand the implications and what they will need to do to make this successful and make a personal and collective decision to commit to bringing the change about. People hearing about change in organizations have one fundamental question – how will it impact and affect me? Organization development specialists employing the awareness, understanding and commitment stages model will tell you that large systems changes like culture change will get bogged down and questions will begin to arise that require the organization to return to awareness and understanding stages to get the managers and employees back onside. Most HR practitioners would not advocate the Jack Welch version where he described the changes he wanted to make at GE as going on a journey where they would carry the wounded but shoot the stragglers.

Much like many organizations who are striving to make large systems or even global changes our experience in both buying and selling human resources services is that the sales model should be modified to work with the potential customer to arrive together at a fuller awareness and understanding of customer needs and objectives and how the vendor’s proposal fits with these and the values and culture of the buyer’s organization. Whether this is called best practices or a change process focused sales model is less important than the need for buyers to find vendors who possess the attributes outlined as the Partnership model.

1. Demonstrates Collaboration Skills

Best practices suggest that collaboration underpins all highly successful business relationships and gets buyers and sellers better results. Collaboration leads to improved awareness, understanding, consensus and commitments as both parties work towards common ground and mutually beneficial outcomes that are customer-centric. A collaborative approach is both a customer-oriented mindset and a set of skills that helps translate the customer’s current reality into initiatives that move the organization’s strategic agenda forward and make a difference.

2. Quick Study of Client Industry

Our experience proves that the quicker a human resources services vendor can understand the potential customer's industry, the better and more strategic the solutions. A good grasp of the business climate and the challenges the industry is facing is an essential pre-cursor to developing strategic objectives and solutions that produce benefits that measurably help customers.

3. Fits the Mission, Values & Culture

It is absolutely crucial that the vendor and their staff are culturally congruent with the buying organization's mission, values and culture. Cultural misfits from the vendor's staff will harm delivery by "turning off" the buyer's staff with their cultural ineptness and lack of appreciation of their reality. The best example of this type of harm by human resources services providers is from the 1970s in North America. Corporations were sending their managers to five day residential team building and small group workshops where people were imbued with the importance of being open and honest with their bosses at work and their spouses at home, irrespective of the culture and situation the unsuspecting new disciple was coming from. These vendors were literally sending these managers to their corporate deaths where their honesty and openness were career-limiting or job-ending as the culture was not ready for this level of openness and their bosses did not much care how their subordinates were made to feel or even if they had feelings. Things did not always fare better for these neophytes at openness on the home front either but that is for another learning piece and another day.

A more positive example of ensuring a cultural fit is the way Disney contracts with companies selling goods in stores at Disney resorts. Contracts compel the business to operate as if it were a Disney company and this requires the tenant's employees to attend Disney orientation, training and refresher courses just like their own staff who they call "cast members". The contracts specify that these employees of the tenant must be paid to attend! They want the experience in a tenant's business to be the same as their "guests" receive when they visit a Disney facility so they want staff of tenant's to be treated like they treat their "cast members". Disney has been so successful they now provide training for other corporations!

4. Helps Develop Strategic Objectives

Many sales outcomes involving human resource services and consulting focus too much on awareness of product and service options and this leaves the customer to focus on the fit for the organization. Experience proves that helping the customer establish strategic objectives for the services and solutions keeps the customer focused on the strategic issues that the services are intended to impact. This adds context and discipline to the vendor and their staff as they too see themselves making a significant contribution to the success of their customer which is probably what got them into providing human resource services in the first place. They wanted to make a difference for others.

5. Develops Solutions with Client

We are not suggesting that the vendor take a page out of the Ikea playbook and have the customer buy and then put the cabinet together at home alone. What works best is customizing solutions that fit the needs of the customer rather than “one size fits all” thinking. Vendors who are leading edge can and do offer solutions to problems that customers have not yet thought of themselves. The more successful outcomes come when solutions are matched to the buyer’s strategic initiatives and this is when working together really makes a difference in outcomes.

The best vendors are those who help customer realize needs they might not yet have realized they had. A good example from the eeVoices product line is the eeBank which helps eliminate calls for references on former employees. Many HR directors when learning that we offer our clients a free service that enables them to use our system to store references that former employees have signed off on, realize that the solution fits needs they had not yet articulated for themselves.

If there is a fuzzy, unclear human resource policy in organizations today, it is the giving references policy. Organizations see giving references is a no win situation. Refuse to give references other than confirm dates of employment and this gives the organization a bad name in the business community and among staff and former staff. However, the risk of a manager using the infamous words, “I probably shouldn’t be saying this” is the horror scenario that leads companies to issue orders that managers are not to give a reference which we know are given anyway. Former employees who resign under a cloud of suspicion have been known to get friends or even private detectives to call for a reference just to see what their old boss will say about them and then use this to threaten law suits if the unproven allegations are restated or apologies not provided. A reference bank that costs the organization submitting references appears to organizations a solution to problems that have gone unnoticed for years.

6. Clarifies Contacts and Roles at Multi-levels

The traditional sales model often calls for a single point of contact on both sides. Suggesting that there should be contacts and roles clarified at multi-levels may seem like a violation of the single point of contact relationship that buyer’s cherish the most – but that is not the case at all. What we mean is single points of contact with clear roles at three levels: (1) account management; (2) service delivery; and, (3) executive.

Establishing roles with the client that will be played at each of these levels will ensure that the single point of contact at the service delivery level is working. Also, this will ensure that the right people are playing the right roles and at the right times. Clear roles and lines of communication will ensure that customer’s needs and issues can be addressed quickly and that issues do not get escalated too quickly. This provides avenues for the buyer to get quick responses and neither organization gets unpleasant surprises as issues are surfaced as they arise.

7. Influence Skills on Customer's Behalf

A red flag for our organization is when a sales person appears powerless to influence their organization on our behalf. You want an account manager who has influence skills and can quickly and effectively address issues on your behalf. This is essential if you want to avoid having to select a new vendor when the contract runs out.

Concluding Thoughts

When selecting vendors organizations know intuitively what they are looking for and what we have attempted to do here is set out what our experience shows works for both customers and vendors especially when selecting human resources services providers. The analogy to each of our seven principles as one of seven veils that once lifted brings the observer and listener closer to what they needed to learn or know might not work for everyone. These do, however, serve as useful guidelines for organizations who are contemplating using third party services to lever internal resources and move quicker on strategic objectives.