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Builder Intelligence Series

BI Judgment 03

Ask What Happened, Not What to Do

Advice tells you what a decision means. Experience tells you what happens next.

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BUILDER INTELLIGENCE · JUDGMENT

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An owner about to hire a first full-time estimator asked three contractors who had already done it.

Two said go ahead. The third said he'd hired too early and carried the salary for eleven months before bid volume justified it.

Two to one. Count the votes and you make the hire.

Ask a different question and you find out the vote was never the point.

A mistake costs the most the first time you make it

The second time a company underprices a type of work, it underprices it by less. The second time it keeps a weak employee too long, the delay is shorter. The second time a change order goes undocumented, somebody catches it at billing instead of at closeout.

The first time costs full price.

That's the whole argument for borrowing experience. Not that other people are smarter. That somebody has already paid for the version of this mistake you're about to make, and the receipt is available for the cost of a good question.

A decision doesn't have a consequence. It has a chain.

This is what experience actually buys, and it's why the advice question falls short.

Take an unsigned change order. The visible event is a missing signature. The chain is longer.

The work gets done. The labor gets paid. The material gets installed. The change never gets billed. The margin disappears. Cash tightens. The company ends up financing work the customer already received, on terms nobody agreed to.

Or take an employee kept past the point of usefulness. Others pick up the slack. The strongest performers notice they're held to a different standard than the person nobody will confront. Resentment builds quietly. Eventually somebody leaves, and it isn't the person the owner was afraid to lose.

That chain is hard to see forward and obvious backward. Somebody who has already walked it sees the fourth step while a first-timer is still looking at the first.

That gap isn't intelligence. It's memory of having paid.

The venue isn't the method

Find a mentor. Join a peer group. Get outside perspective. Build a board.

Those are venues. None of them is a method by itself.

Put the same question to the same room twice and the quality of the answer changes completely depending on how it was framed. What should I do invites an opinion, and everybody has one. What happened when you did it can only be answered by somebody who did it.

The venue doesn't filter for experience. The question does.

Which means an owner can be in a good room and still get bad help, and can get excellent help from one person over coffee, depending entirely on what they ask.

The tool

Four parts. The third one is the one that keeps you from acting on somebody's confident guess.

1. Ask somebody who did it, not somebody who advises on it

Not somebody who consults on the topic, teaches it, sells software for it, or has read a great deal about it. Somebody who made the call and lived with what came after.

Only the second kind can tell you what it cost.

2. Ask about the decision, not about your situation

The instinct is to describe your own circumstances and ask what to do with them. That hands the other person a hypothetical, and hypotheticals produce opinions.

Ask about their decision instead. Seven questions, in roughly this order.

Question	What it gets you
What made you decide to do it?	The conditions that were true at the time
What did you miss?	The part that isn't in anybody's advice
What surprised you?	The gap between the plan and the work
What did it cost?	The number, which is what makes the rest credible
What happened next?	The second and third link in the chain
What would you do differently?	The specific fix, separated from the regret
What would you never do again?	The line they now hold, and why

Not one of these can be answered from theory. That's the point of the list.

3. Run the authenticity test

People dress up opinions as experience without meaning to deceive anybody. Two of the seven questions separate them.

What did it cost? Somebody who did it has a number, a name, or a date. Somebody who didn't has an adjective.

What surprised you? Somebody who did it was surprised by something, because everybody is. Somebody who didn't will tell you it went about as expected.

No cost and no surprise means no experience. Take the answer as an opinion, which may still be worth something, and keep looking for somebody who paid.

4. When two answers conflict, ask what was different

Two people who both did it will sometimes tell you opposite things. That isn't a contradiction and it isn't a reason to discount both.

It's information about conditions.

Ask what was different. Different market, different client mix, different crew size, different year, different cash position. A decision that worked at eight employees can fail at twenty-five, and the person it worked for won't always know which part carried it.

Conflicting answers narrow the question. They don't muddy it.

Composite example: how the estimator hire resolved

Back to the three contractors and the split answer.

Instead of averaging it, the owner asked what had been different. The one who regretted it had hired during a slow spring on the strength of a pipeline that never materialized. The two who recommended it had hired going into a confirmed backlog.

Nobody had disagreed about the estimator. They'd disagreed about when.

The hire went ahead five months later, once there was signed work in hand. Same decision, different timing, and the timing was the only thing the conflict was ever about.

The two-to-one vote would have produced the right answer for the wrong reason, which works until the year it doesn't.

What changes when this becomes a habit

Fewer expensive first-time mistakes, because fewer decisions are genuinely first-time.

Faster pattern recognition. An owner who has collected twenty consequence chains starts seeing the third and fourth step in situations they haven't personally lived through.

And the part that matters most for the company rather than the owner: the team starts asking each other the same question. A superintendent who asks another superintendent what happened when you tried that is building judgment that doesn't route through the owner.

That's how judgment stops being one person's job.

What this doesn't do

Borrowed experience doesn't make the decision. The conditions are yours, the money is yours, and the consequences will be yours.

It also doesn't replace the analysis. Knowing what happened to somebody else isn't a substitute for knowing your own numbers.

What it does is shorten the distance between a decision and an informed one. It shows you the chain before you're standing in it.

Start here

Name two people who have actually made the decision in front of you. Not two people who could have an opinion about it. Two who did it, and paid for it.

Then make one call this week.

Write down what it cost them, because you'll forget the number and remember the story, and the number is the part that will change your mind.

The question is free. The experience behind the answer was not.

That's the whole trade. Somebody has already paid tuition on the decision in front of you, and the only thing standing between you and what they learned is a better question than what should I do.

Practical insight. Real context. Zero fluff.