PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

I Outsourced the Job and I'm Still Answering Every Call

How to Define Responsibilities, Manage Sign-Offs and Communicate with External Contractors While Maintaining Quality Without Doing After-Hours Work Your Company Has Already Paid For



Max Paradox

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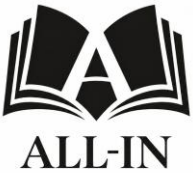
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INTRO

It's 7:18 on a Wednesday evening, and you're halfway through dinner when your phone lights up. The external consulting firm hired to prepare your company's competitor analysis has a quick question. Apparently, one competitor has changed its product naming system, and the analysts aren't sure how to classify the new models. You explain the distinction. Five minutes later, another message arrives. Could you confirm which markets should be included in the comparison? You answer, although the information was in the original brief. At 8:06, someone asks whether you could review the spreadsheet before tomorrow's meeting. At 9:34, you're correcting formulas, rewriting conclusions, and reorganizing slides. The consulting firm has successfully outsourced its analytical work to you. This is an impressive business model, particularly considering that your company is paying them rather than the other way around.

You probably didn't expect this when you signed the contract. The whole idea was beautifully simple: your organization needed a result, another company possessed the expertise and resources to deliver it, and an agreed fee would make the arrangement worthwhile for both sides. You would define the requirements, provide necessary information, make important decisions, and review the finished work. The contractor would handle the execution. Somewhere between the introductory meeting and the fourth emergency phone call, however, that elegant arrangement developed an unfortunate personality disorder. The contractor began behaving like an employee who needed constant supervision, while you became an unpaid project coordinator, technical adviser, quality inspector, and occasional rescue team. The invoice remained entirely unaffected by this transformation.

The frustrating part is that the work may still get finished. Reports arrive, installations are completed, campaigns launch, and management sees evidence that outsourcing has delivered results. What rarely appears in the official calculation is the hidden effort required to make those results possible. Someone on your team spent hours clarifying instructions that had already been provided. Someone corrected mistakes before the customer noticed. Someone negotiated with another supplier because the appointed contractor couldn't resolve an ordinary operational problem. Perhaps that someone was you, and perhaps those hours came from evenings originally reserved for activities unrelated to purchase orders. The service looks reasonably priced until you add the invisible second workforce supplied by the customer.

Of course, outsourcing doesn't mean abandoning responsibility. You cannot hand an external company a vague request, disappear for six weeks, and then express outrage when the result doesn't match an expectation you never communicated. Contractors need access to relevant information, clearly defined requirements, and decisions that genuinely belong to the customer. They may also encounter unexpected circumstances that require cooperation. A supplier asking for approval to exceed an agreed budget is behaving differently from one asking you to organize its employees' lunch breaks. Both questions might be delivered with the same cheerful greeting, but only one necessarily belongs on your desk. Learning to recognize that difference is essential if you want to manage a service without becoming personally responsible for every activity involved in delivering it.

One reason outsourcing arrangements deteriorate is that organizations delegate tasks without properly designing the working relationship. A contract describes the service, a purchase order records the price, and an enthusiastic kickoff meeting produces reassuring phrases such as "full ownership" and "seamless communication." Unfortunately, these expressions can

mean almost anything. Does full ownership include preparing the implementation schedule? Who decides whether a deliverable meets the requirements? When must a problem be escalated, and what should the contractor investigate before contacting you? Who is responsible when two suppliers depend on each other's work? If nobody establishes practical answers, the questions eventually return to whoever seems most knowledgeable, available, or reluctant to let things fail. In many organizations, that person has already been assigned several other jobs.

You might also be unintentionally helping the problem survive. This is an uncomfortable possibility because your intentions are probably excellent. You want the deadline met, the customer satisfied, and the project completed without another exhausting argument. When the contractor struggles, you provide the answer. When the work contains errors, you make the corrections. When an important task falls between two people's responsibilities, you pick it up rather than risk an embarrassing delay. Each intervention seems sensible in isolation. Together, however, they teach everyone that difficult work eventually migrates toward you. The contractor may not be consciously exploiting the arrangement. It simply discovers that asking you is faster than solving the problem internally. Your competence becomes a convenient substitute for its operating process.

The obvious reactions aren't always effective. You could schedule more meetings, demand longer progress reports, insist on being copied into every conversation, or introduce an approval form for decisions as minor as choosing the correct spreadsheet tab. These measures might create the comforting appearance of control while making the underlying relationship even more dependent on your involvement. Alternatively, you could stop answering messages and announce that everything is the contractor's responsibility. That approach may feel wonderfully liberating for approximately twelve minutes, until an issue

requiring your genuine authorization brings the project to a halt. The aim is neither total supervision nor theatrical disappearance. It's to create a working arrangement in which the right people can act independently and the necessary decisions reach you in a usable form.

Consider how a competent supplier might handle a complication. Instead of sending "We have a problem with the deadline. Please advise," it explains what caused the delay, which corrective actions have already been attempted, what alternatives are realistically available, and which decision requires your approval. You can then evaluate the consequences and exercise your authority without conducting the supplier's investigation yourself. That distinction changes the entire conversation. You're no longer the person expected to manufacture every solution. You're the customer responsible for defining business priorities, making reserved decisions, and assessing whether the promised result has been delivered. The contractor remains responsible for organizing and performing the work within its agreed scope.

This book explores how to make that distinction work in ordinary business life, where documents are incomplete, priorities change, and everyone seems to need an answer before lunch. You'll learn how to define responsibilities that survive contact with reality, describe deliverables clearly enough to evaluate them, and establish communication that produces decisions rather than endless correspondence. We'll examine acceptance procedures, quality checks, service-level agreements, progress milestones, scope changes, and invoices that contain mysterious charges nobody remembers authorizing. We'll also look at what happens when several contractors are involved and each confidently explains why the failure belongs to someone else. The purpose isn't to create impressive paperwork. It's to develop practical arrangements that prevent avoidable confusion and make genuine problems easier to resolve.

There are limits to what good management can accomplish. A supplier may genuinely lack resources, a deadline may be unrealistic, or your organization may refuse to approve a necessary change. Some contracts restrict your options, and certain decisions require legal, financial, security, or technical expertise. You cannot solve every structural problem by writing a firmer email or becoming more assertive. Sometimes the responsible response is to document a constraint, explain its consequences, and obtain a decision from someone with the authority to make it. Sometimes an urgent intervention is necessary to prevent significant harm, even when the underlying mistake belongs to the contractor. The important thing is to keep exceptional action from quietly becoming the permanent operating model.

You should also be able to recognize success without requiring perfection. A good contractor will still ask questions, encounter obstacles, and occasionally make mistakes. A properly managed relationship doesn't eliminate every interruption. It makes interruptions meaningful. You know when a call concerns something that genuinely needs your attention and when the supplier should be working toward a solution independently. Quality can be verified without you personally rebuilding the deliverable. Progress can be assessed without daily interrogation. When something goes wrong, the responsibility for investigating and fixing it doesn't automatically land on the person who happens to answer fastest.

Imagine finishing work on a perfectly ordinary afternoon. The contractor has delivered the agreed results, the outstanding issues have clear owners, and the next review is scheduled for a sensible reason. Your phone is quiet, but not because anyone has been instructed to hide bad news. It's quiet because the people you've hired have the information, authority, and processes needed to perform their jobs. You're still accountable for your organization's decisions, and you're still paying attention to the outcome. You

simply aren't doing the contractor's work after everyone else has gone home.

That's the kind of outsourcing worth paying for. And if your phone rings during dinner, perhaps it will finally be someone you actually wanted to talk to.

Chapter 1 - You Outsourced the Task, but Somehow Kept the Work

At 10:15 on Tuesday morning, the company handling your online store's product returns sends you a spreadsheet containing forty-three unresolved cases. The subject line reads, "Items requiring client guidance." You open it expecting a handful of unusual situations. Instead, you discover questions about damaged packaging, missing accessories, incorrect labels, and customers who returned the wrong product. These are precisely the situations the returns specialist was hired to handle. Nevertheless, each row contains a familiar request: "Please advise." By lunchtime, you've personally reviewed nineteen photographs, located six original orders, and explained how to classify a scratched coffee machine. The contractor has demonstrated remarkable efficiency in collecting problems and transferring them to you. Its actual returns-processing capability remains somewhat mysterious.

The strange thing about this arrangement is that everyone can sincerely believe it is working. The contractor receives prompt decisions, customers eventually get their refunds, and management sees that returns are being processed. Nobody has deliberately abandoned their responsibilities. Yet the service you purchased to reduce operational pressure has quietly created a second workflow. One company receives the returns; your organization makes the decisions that enable their processing. The supplier manages the physical items, while you manage its uncertainty. This might be an acceptable arrangement if you intentionally purchased warehouse labor under your direct supervision. It is considerably less attractive if you paid for an independently managed returns service.

To understand what's going wrong, forget the attractive presentation that accompanied the original proposal. Look instead

at where the actual work takes place. Who identifies problems? Who investigates them? Who decides which ordinary procedure applies? Who arranges corrective action, and who checks that it happened? Most importantly, who becomes responsible when somebody cannot immediately find an answer? These questions reveal more about the working relationship than a carefully polished organization chart. A contract may assign operational responsibility to the supplier, but daily behavior can gradually produce a different arrangement. The problem is not merely that you receive too many messages. It is that an increasing share of the contractor's work depends on your personal intervention.

The invisible second contract

Every outsourcing arrangement contains the formal agreement and the practical way people behave once the work begins. Ideally, the two match. The written agreement defines a service, and the practical relationship delivers it. Sometimes, however, an invisible second contract develops through repeated habits. The supplier asks for assistance with an ordinary issue, and you provide it. The next similar issue is handled the same way. Soon your help is no longer perceived as exceptional. It becomes part of the expected operating procedure, although nobody has updated the original scope or considered what this means for your workload. The supplier may even describe your responsiveness as one of the reasons the partnership is so successful.

This second contract is particularly difficult to challenge because it was never negotiated. There is no document to amend, no obvious decision to reverse, and frequently no single moment when things went wrong. If you suddenly stop performing a task you've handled for months, the contractor may genuinely be confused. Its employees have learned that the customer manages that activity. Some may never have been informed that the task originally belonged to their company. Meanwhile, your colleagues assume you are the designated person because you always respond. An

informal habit has become an organizational fact without passing through the inconvenient stage of anyone approving it.

The first practical step is to expose that hidden work. For a normal working week, make a simple record of unplanned activities related to the supplier. Record the request, what you actually did, how long it took, and why your involvement was necessary. Include preparation and follow-up, not just the duration of phone calls. A seven-minute conversation may require twenty minutes of checking records and another ten minutes to recover concentration afterward. You don't need an elaborate time-tracking platform. A basic document will reveal whether the same activities repeatedly return to you. The aim is not to calculate the precise financial value of every interrupted thought. It's to discover which responsibilities have migrated without anyone noticing.

The resulting pattern may surprise you. Perhaps most of the questions concern a single category of returns for which the agreed procedure is unclear. Perhaps the contractor repeatedly contacts you because it cannot access information your company promised to provide. Or perhaps its employees have access to everything they need but prefer requesting individual instructions rather than exercising their assigned judgment. These situations look similar from the perspective of your overflowing inbox, yet require different responses. The first needs a better rule, the second requires fulfillment of a customer dependency, and the third calls for restoring the supplier's operational responsibility. Treating them all as evidence of incompetence would be easy, satisfying, and frequently wrong.

Why competent people become unpaid coordinators

The most reliable way to inherit unwanted work is to be good at solving problems. If you understand a process better than anyone else, you can often answer a question immediately. Watching somebody spend an hour investigating something you could settle in five minutes feels inefficient. You intervene, the immediate

difficulty disappears, and everyone is grateful. Unfortunately, you have also removed the supplier's incentive to develop the capability required for the next occurrence. The short-term saving is visible; the long-term dependence isn't. Over time, the contractor learns that your availability is an operational resource, although your company never intended to provide it.

There is also the matter of consequences. If a customer refund is delayed, the complaint may reach your department, not the contractor's headquarters. If the service fails, your manager will probably ask you for an explanation. Under those circumstances, taking control can seem safer than allowing the supplier time to fulfill its responsibilities. This is not simply a matter of personal boundaries. You are responding to genuine business pressure. The challenge is finding a way to protect the outcome without permanently replacing the people who were hired to achieve it. Sometimes that requires tolerating a little uncertainty while another organization does the work it has agreed to perform.

Your organization may unintentionally reinforce the problem. Senior managers often appreciate the employee who can rescue a difficult situation. They see commitment, initiative, and impressive problem-solving skills. What they may not see is the increasingly fragile process that requires constant rescue. A person who prevents twenty routine problems through effective supplier management can appear less heroic than someone who spends an entire weekend fixing one avoidable disaster. Yet the quieter achievement may be more valuable. If recognition consistently goes to the person who personally saves the day, the company should not be surprised when everyone becomes remarkably skilled at organizing emergencies.

Are you supervising the result or performing the service?

There is an important distinction between activities that belong to the customer and those included in the contracted service. You may need to define business policies, approve exceptional refunds,

authorize changes to financial limits, or provide information available only within your company. Those obligations do not disappear merely because a supplier is involved. However, processing standard returns, checking items against agreed criteria, documenting ordinary exceptions, and organizing the contractor's employees may belong to the supplier if that is what the service agreement provides. The correct boundary depends on the actual arrangement. The word "outsourcing" does not establish it automatically.

A useful question is whether you are making a decision that requires the customer's authority or preparing a solution the contractor should have developed. Imagine a returned product that falls outside the agreed refund policy. The supplier might reasonably need a customer decision about whether to grant an exception. But before contacting you, it could identify the relevant facts, explain the policy conflict, and present the available options. By contrast, deciding whether a standard return qualifies under clear, agreed criteria may already be part of its job. If the supplier asks you to classify every item individually, your organization hasn't necessarily purchased the level of operational independence it expected.

You can change the pattern without turning every conversation into an argument. When a supplier presents an ordinary problem without having investigated it, ask what has already been checked, which options are available, and what decision specifically requires your authorization. If the answer shows that the matter falls within its agreed responsibilities, direct the next action back to the appropriate owner. If the supplier lacks required information, provide it through the proper channel. The purpose is to stop giving complete operational instructions whenever somebody says, "What should we do?" You want the contractor to develop its own recommendation before transferring responsibility for the decision.

This approach requires consistency but not stubbornness. A serious safety issue, suspected fraud, significant financial exposure, or other urgent risk may justify immediate involvement regardless of normal boundaries. In such circumstances, protecting people and the business takes priority over demonstrating perfect contractual discipline. However, an exceptional intervention should remain recognizable as an exception. Once the immediate risk is controlled, establish why the intervention was necessary and whether the process requires adjustment. Otherwise, one emergency can become the precedent for a hundred routine requests. The supplier remembers that you helped, but conveniently forgets the part involving an emergency.

The real price of being helpful

When evaluating a contractor, people naturally compare the invoice against the agreed budget. That comparison matters, but it doesn't capture the full operational cost. Suppose a lower-priced provider requires an additional six hours of internal coordination each week, while a more expensive provider works largely independently. The cheaper option might still offer better value, but you cannot know without considering the additional labor and disruption. Those hours have consequences even when nobody receives overtime pay. They occupy capacity that could otherwise support customers, improve processes, or deliver work directly related to your department's responsibilities.

There is a subtler cost as well. The more your team compensates for the contractor's shortcomings, the less accurate your assessment of the service becomes. Customers receive acceptable outcomes because your employees quietly repair the process. Reported performance remains respectable, and the supplier believes its methods are effective. Management may then renew the agreement on the assumption that the service requires only modest supervision. Your team's contribution has become invisible, so the organization makes purchasing decisions using incomplete

information. Recording recurring interventions isn't an exercise in complaining. It allows everyone to understand what the current arrangement actually requires.

Of course, not every contractor is capable of operating independently under every set of conditions. Some services are deliberately structured around customer direction. Others require intensive cooperation because they involve changing business requirements or specialized decisions reserved for the client. The appropriate amount of involvement must be judged against the agreed scope, not an imaginary ideal in which the supplier knows everything and never needs assistance. A small specialist working under your direct instruction should not be measured against the expectations of a fully managed service provider. Problems arise when your company believes it bought one model but behaves as though it purchased the other.

Restore the boundary one recurring task at a time

Attempting to correct every informal responsibility at once can create unnecessary resistance. A more practical approach is to select one repeated activity and establish how it should operate. In the returns example, you might begin with routine classifications. Review the agreed criteria, identify any missing information, and confirm which cases the contractor can resolve independently. Then communicate that future standard cases should be processed under those criteria, while genuine policy exceptions should arrive with the relevant facts and a recommendation. This gives the supplier a clear route to greater independence without abandoning it to guesswork.

Observe what happens afterward. If routine classifications decline in your inbox while accuracy remains acceptable, the change has worked. If the contractor continues asking identical questions, investigate whether employees understand the procedure and possess the necessary authority. If accuracy deteriorates, examine the rule and the supplier's training before

simply taking the task back. There is no virtue in achieving fewer phone calls by allowing a service to fail quietly. The measure of success is reliable execution with appropriate customer involvement, not silence for its own sake.

You may also need a conversation inside your own company. If colleagues routinely bypass the supplier's designated contact and ask you to resolve operational questions, the working relationship will remain confused. Explain which matters belong to the contractor and which decisions must return to the customer. Make sure the arrangement is supported by people who have the authority to define the service. Otherwise, you may improve the supplier's behavior while your own organization continues to undermine the boundary. A workable outsourcing model requires discipline on both sides, not a heroic individual endlessly defending a process nobody else follows.

The ultimate test is what happens when you are occupied with something else. Can the contractor continue ordinary operations without your immediate participation? Can it recognize the situations that genuinely require authorization? Can it investigate a problem and provide information sufficient for a decision? If so, your role is beginning to resemble effective supplier management. If ordinary work stops whenever you enter a meeting, the arrangement remains more dependent on you than it should be.

And that brings us back to the spreadsheet containing forty-three cases requiring client guidance. Some entries may genuinely require your judgment. Others should never have reached you. The task is to distinguish them, correct the reasons behind the unnecessary requests, and ensure that next week's spreadsheet contains fewer questions the contractor was hired to answer. You don't need to become less helpful. You need your help to be directed where it actually belongs. That is how outsourcing starts removing work from your organization instead of merely changing the letterhead on the instructions you still have to provide.

Chapter 2 - Everyone Is Responsible, Which Means Nobody Is

The company has hired a specialist agency to produce photographs for a new product catalogue. The agency will arrange the studio, photographers, lighting, and editing. Your merchandising team will provide the products, while marketing will approve the visual direction. The launch date has been agreed, the budget is approved, and everyone appears perfectly comfortable with their role. Then the first shooting day arrives. The photographer asks where the product samples are. Merchandising says the agency was supposed to collect them. The agency thought samples would be delivered directly to the studio. Marketing is waiting to approve a test image that nobody has taken. By eleven o'clock, twelve people are involved in determining who should put six boxes into a delivery van. Ownership has become a philosophical question, and the product catalogue remains stubbornly unphotographed.

The problem isn't necessarily that people refuse responsibility. More often, they accept different versions of it. Marketing believes it owns the creative outcome. The agency believes it owns photography and post-production. Merchandising believes its job ends when products are made available. Each statement may be reasonable, but none establishes who must arrange the movement of physical samples between locations. Because the missing activity sits between responsibilities, nobody has planned it. The organization has assigned ownership of the major deliverables without defining the connections that make those deliverables possible. Unfortunately, projects don't advance because everyone has a plausible explanation. They advance because somebody performs the necessary work.

Assigning responsibility is therefore more demanding than placing a person's name beside an activity in a spreadsheet. You must distinguish who performs the work, who ensures the result is delivered, who provides necessary input, and who has the authority to accept or change the outcome. Those functions sometimes belong to the same person, especially in a small project. In larger arrangements, they often sit with different people or organizations. Confusion begins when participants assume that being involved in a task means possessing authority over every aspect of it. A creative director may approve visual quality without being responsible for finding missing samples. A customer representative may accept finished images without managing the photographer's working day.

Responsibility needs an object

Statements such as "the agency owns production" or "marketing owns the project" sound reassuring because they assign broad areas to identifiable parties. Yet responsibility becomes useful only when attached to something specific enough to verify. What is the agency expected to deliver? At which stage? What must the customer provide before work can begin? Who decides whether a disputed image matches the approved creative direction? These questions transform a vague declaration into a practical arrangement. The point isn't to write an instruction manual covering every conceivable event. It's to identify the important outcomes and the activities most likely to fall between organizations.

Consider the difference between assigning an agency responsibility for "product photography" and assigning it responsibility for planning shoots, arranging studio resources, photographing an agreed list of products, and delivering edited files in specified formats. The second description makes the expected work much clearer. It still leaves questions about how samples arrive, who approves styling, and what happens when a product is