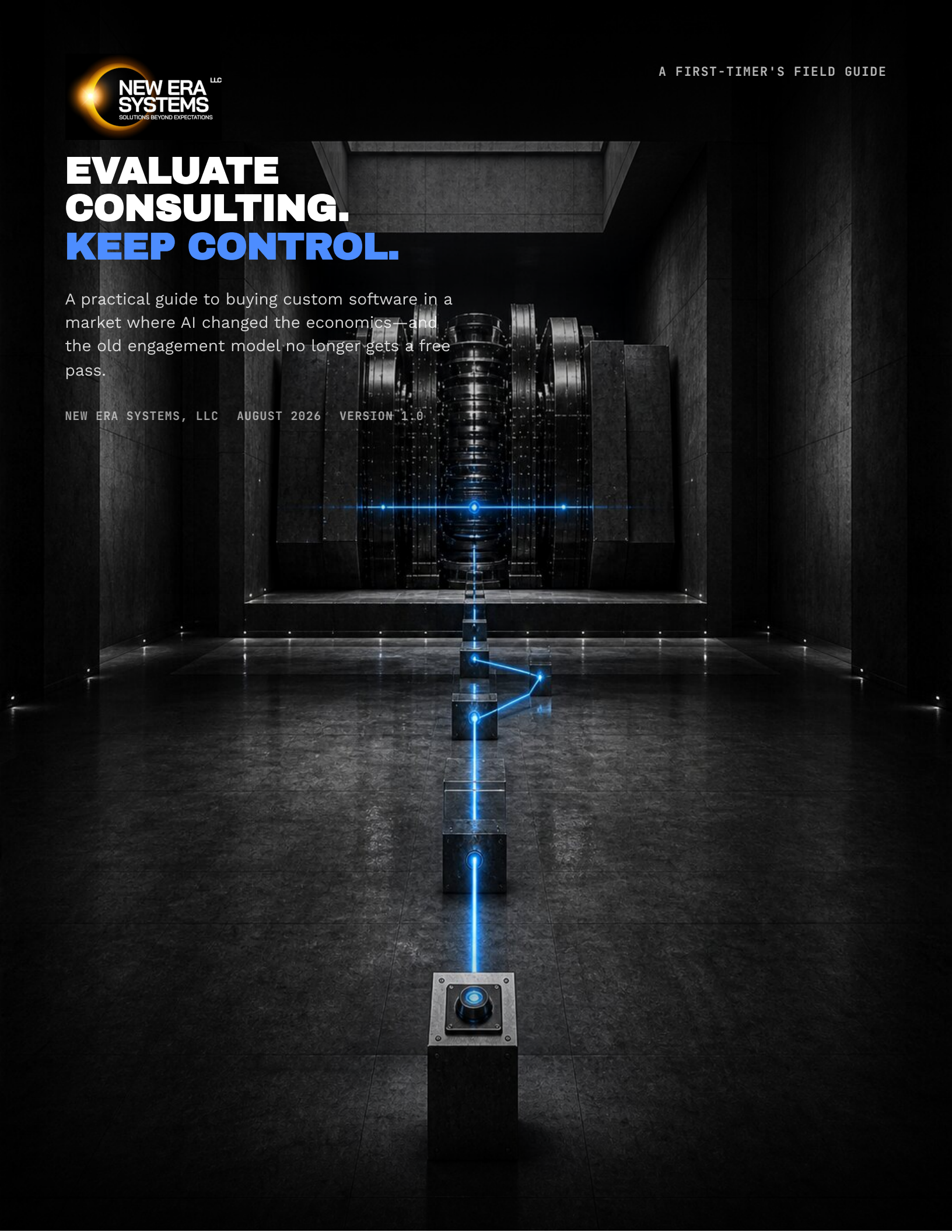




EVALUATE CONSULTING. KEEP CONTROL.

A practical guide to buying custom software in a market where AI changed the economics—and the old engagement model no longer gets a free pass.

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YOU ARE NOT BEHIND.

Most owners have never commissioned custom software. You do not need to become a technical buyer overnight. You need a process that keeps the important decisions visible and keeps the risk from quietly moving onto you.

01

START WITH PAIN.

Bring the slow, fragile, expensive part of the business. The builder should translate it.

02

SEE IT EARLY.

React to working software before a contract turns assumptions into obligations.

03

KEEP YOUR EXITS.

Every finished piece should leave you free to continue, redirect, or stop.

04

COMMIT WITH EVIDENCE.

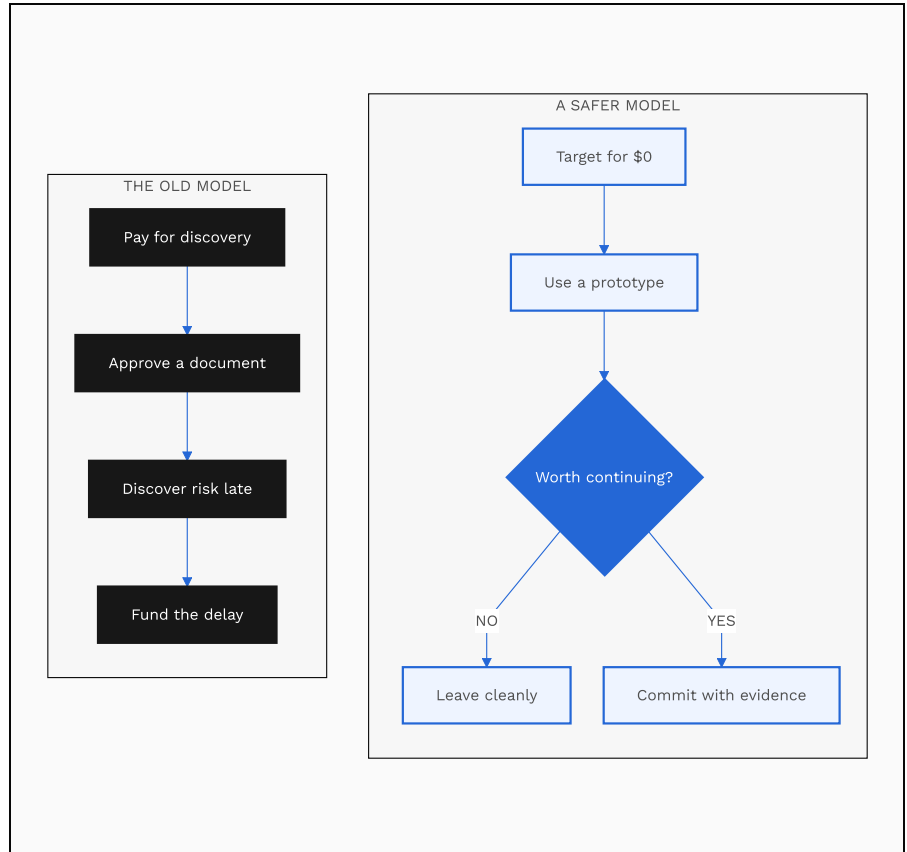
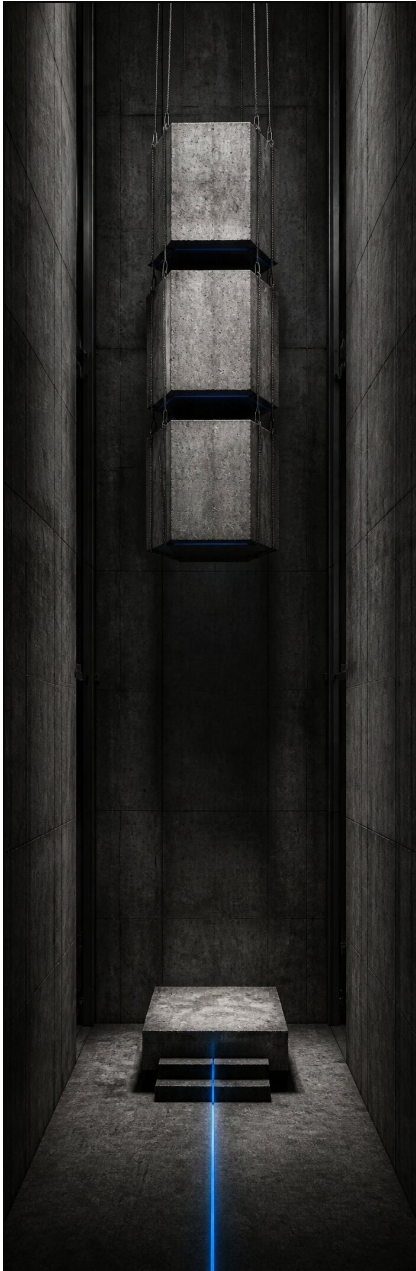
A date means more after the dangerous assumptions have already been tested.

YOU DO NOT NEED BLIND TRUST.

The purpose of a healthy engagement is to replace trust with visible evidence as quickly as possible.

WHO HOLDS THE RISK?

The biggest difference between consulting models is not the vocabulary, methodology name, or team size. It is who pays when the early assumptions are wrong.



The old model is not automatically dishonest. It simply places more uncertainty on the buyer. Paid discovery, document-first approval, and elastic timelines mean you finance the process that discovers whether the original idea was sound.

SAFETY IS STRUCTURAL.

A good relationship helps. A model that makes the right behavior easier helps more.

THE SAFE PATH.

Four stages are enough. Each stage should tell you what becomes real, what it costs, and where you can leave.



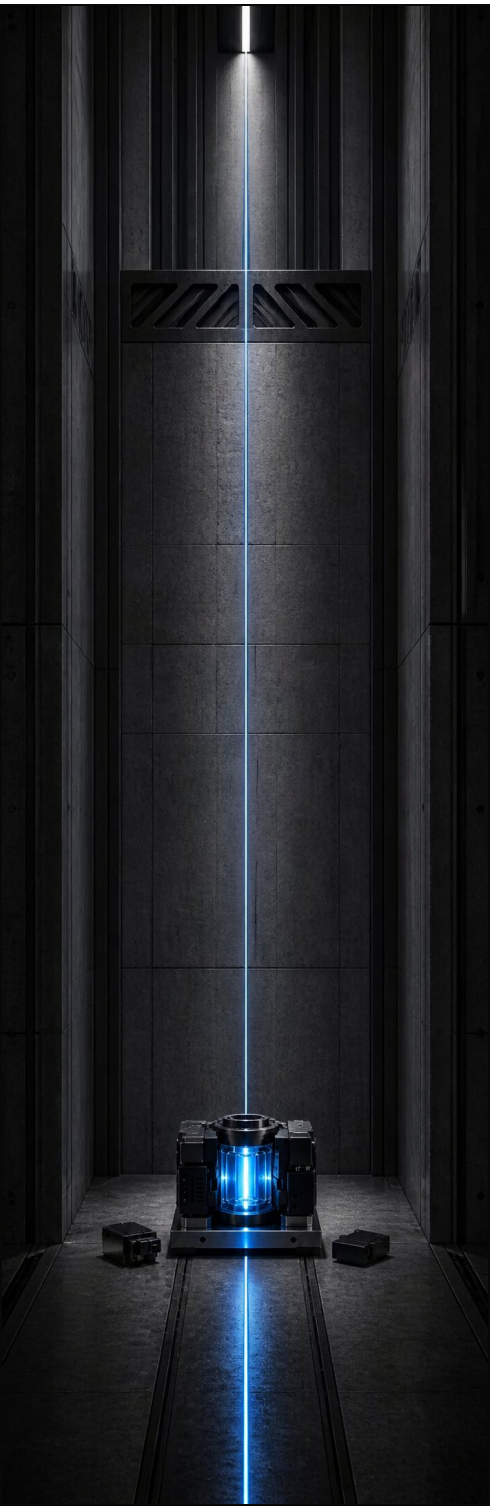
01 Find the signal. Is there a specific problem worth proving?	02 Make it tangible. Can a working artifact create conviction?
03 Build in decisions. Is each finished piece still worth the next one?	04 Finish what is known. Can the validated system ship on the committed date?

THE COMMITMENT COMES THIRD.

That is the core protection. The first two stages exist to spend uncertainty before you spend meaningful money.

BEFORE YOU PAY.

The first two stages are where a safe process earns the right to ask for commitment.



01

TARGETING

A short exercise, at your pace, to identify the actual operating problem. Days, not weeks. The output is enough signal to build something real—not a polished report about future work.

COST

Nothing.

YOUR DECISION

Is the problem specific enough to test?

YOUR EXIT

Walk away at any point. If the signal is weak, the builder should say so and part cleanly.

WHAT GOOD FEELS LIKE

The problem sounds sharper in plain language. You can explain the bottleneck without explaining software.

02

THE PROTOTYPE

A working thing you can use, break, and react to. Not a document describing one. The prototype exists to expose wrong assumptions while they are still cheap.

COST

Still nothing, unless you decide it is worth continuing.

YOUR DECISION

Does this create enough relief or leverage to justify the build?

YOUR EXIT

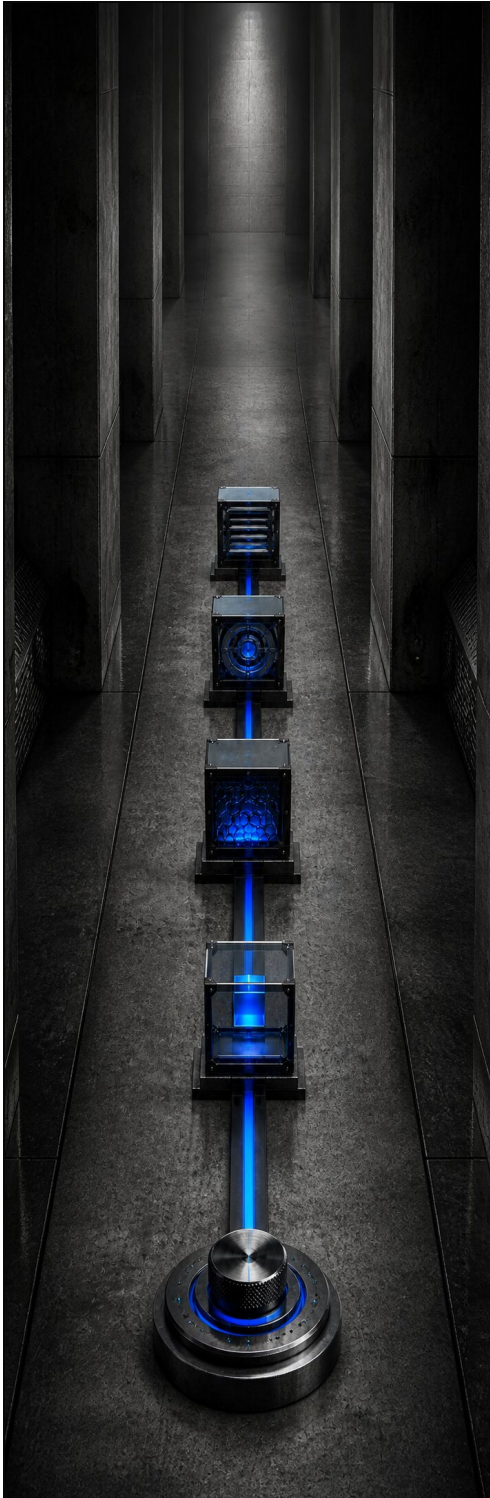
If it does not convince you, stop. You keep the clarity.

WHAT GOOD FEELS LIKE

You are reacting to behavior, not imagining it from a slide. Your questions become concrete.

AFTER YOU COMMIT.

Payment begins only after evidence exists. Control remains with you because the work stays small enough to inspect.



03

ITERATION

The system grows in small, finished pieces. Every piece is usable evidence and a genuine checkpoint—not a progress percentage attached to unfinished work.

COST

Agreed before each piece, never discovered afterward.

YOUR DECISION

Continue, change course, or stop.

YOUR EXIT

Any checkpoint. Stopping costs a conversation, not a contract dispute.

WHAT GOOD FEELS LIKE

You can look away to run the business and return to a clear record of finished work.

04

DELIVERY

The validated system moves into production on the committed date. The date can hold because the largest unknowns were removed before the commitment.

COST

What was agreed.

YOUR DECISION

Accept the finished system against behavior you have already seen.

YOUR EXIT

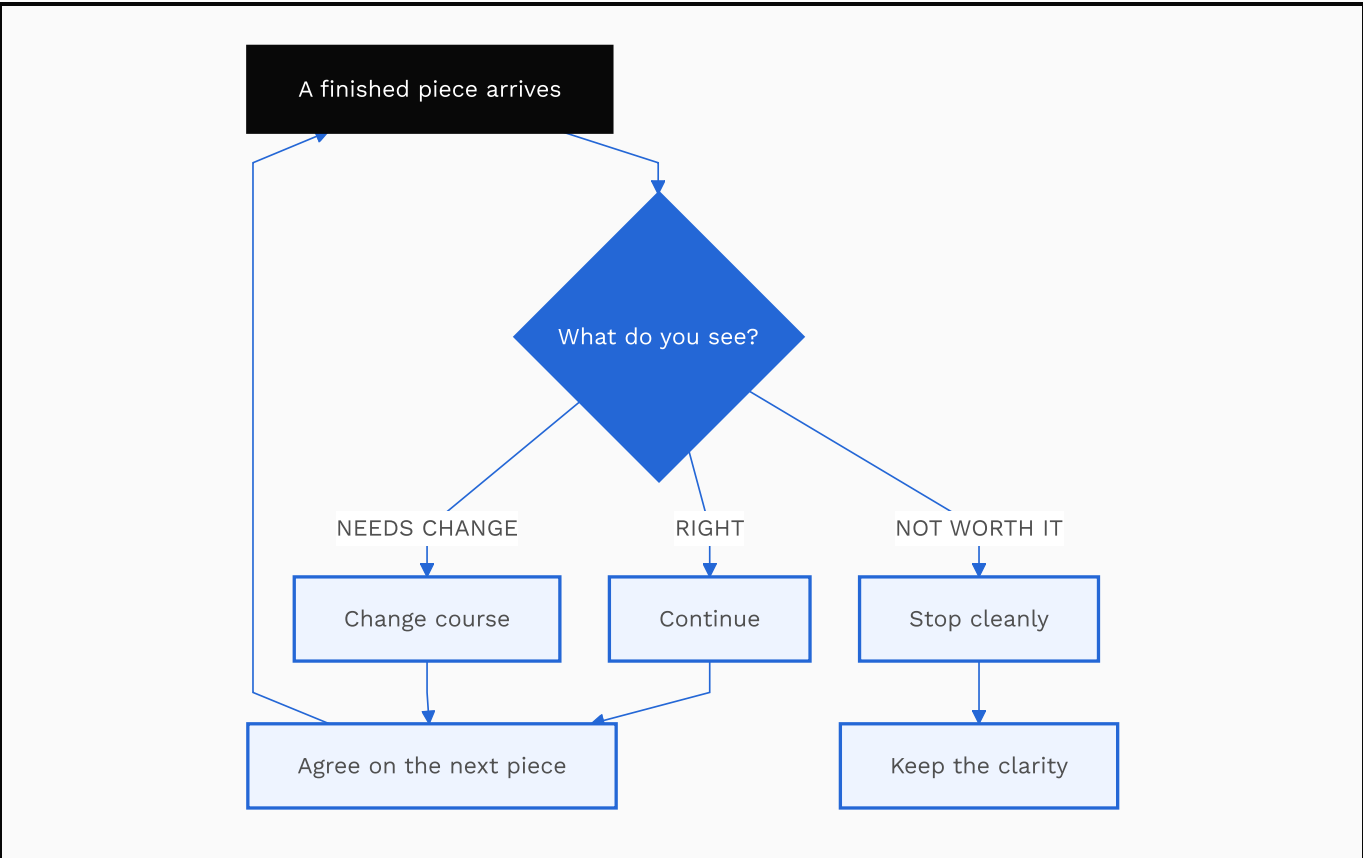
You have had one at every checkpoint. Delivery is the last one.

WHAT GOOD FEELS LIKE

Go-live is an arrival, not a reveal. Nothing important is being shown to you for the first time.

EVERY PIECE DECIDES.

A checkpoint is not a status meeting. It is a moment where the evidence is complete enough for you to make a real decision.



CONTINUE The evidence supports the direction. Agree on the next finished piece.	CHANGE COURSE New information changed the target. Redirect while the correction is still small.	STOP The value is not there. End cleanly without negotiating your way out of a long bet.
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WHAT TO DEMAND.

Take this list into every conversation. A firm that can meet these conditions places less structural risk on the buyer.

01 No billing for discovery. You should not pay a firm to learn what problem it is being asked to solve.	02 A prototype before commitment. React to something real before assumptions harden into a statement of work.
03 Payment for output. Charts, recommendations, and process descriptions are not substitutes for working software.	04 A small team with judgment. Headcount is not a proxy for quality. Know who is making decisions about your system.
05 A date that holds. Ask what happens when the date slips. The answer reveals who carries the cost of uncertainty.	

DO NOT NEGOTIATE AWAY YOUR SAFETY.

If a firm cannot work this way, decide whether its model is worth the additional risk before discussing price.

HEAR THE WARNING.

Red flags rarely sound sinister. They sound like ordinary consulting language. The translation is what matters.

WHAT YOU HEAR	WHAT IT MEANS	ASK THIS
“We need a paid discovery phase to scope this properly.”	You are funding the firm's learning curve before receiving working evidence.	What do I own and use when discovery ends?
“Sign the SOW and you will see designs in six weeks.”	You are approving something that does not exist yet.	What can I interact with before I commit?
“Timelines are estimates. Software is unpredictable.”	Slippage is treated as normal, and you may be paying for it.	Which risks remain when the date is committed?
“We will put a full team of twelve on it.”	Headcount is being presented as quality and billed as quantity.	Who makes architecture and quality decisions?
“The deliverable is a roadmap and recommendations deck.”	You are buying a description of work rather than work.	What will be running when the engagement ends?

BAD PEOPLE ARE NOT REQUIRED.

A conventional model can place the risk on you even when everyone involved is capable and sincere. You are allowed to decline the model.

BRING THE PROBLEM.

You do not need homework before the first conversation. These prompts simply help you name the relief you are looking for.

WHERE DOES THE BUSINESS FEEL STUCK?

Name the repeated delay, fragile handoff, manual workaround, compliance risk, or customer frustration.

WHAT WOULD RELIEF LOOK LIKE?

Describe the observable change. Faster close. Fewer errors. One source of truth. A process that no longer needs babysitting.

WHAT HAPPENS TODAY?

List the people, spreadsheets, inboxes, systems, and workarounds currently holding the process together.

WHAT MUST NOT GO WRONG?

Name the regulatory, contractual, financial, operational, or reputational boundary the system must respect.

THAT IS ENOUGH.

A good first conversation begins with the operating problem. Architecture, scope, and implementation belong on the builder's side of the table.

COMPARE THE MODELS.

A proposal tells you what a firm plans to do. These questions reveal where uncertainty, control, and the cost of being wrong actually sit.

LOOK AT	LOWER-RISK STRUCTURE	ASK THIS
Working evidence	You can interact with something real before making a broad commitment.	What can I use before I sign?
Early learning	The cost is bounded, the output is useful, and stopping does not require a negotiation.	What do I own if we stop after discovery?
Delivery unit	Work arrives in small, finished pieces rather than one distant reveal.	How often does something complete arrive?
Decision rights	Continue, redirect, and stop are explicit options at every checkpoint.	Where can I exit cleanly?
Human accountability	A named person owns architecture, tradeoffs, and final quality.	Who can overrule a weak technical decision?
Date confidence	The date is set after dangerous assumptions have been tested, with ownership and margin made clear.	Which unknowns remain when the date is committed?
Ownership	Code, data, documentation, credentials, and transition terms are unambiguous.	What leaves with me if the relationship ends?

SCORE THE STRUCTURE.

Good chemistry helps, but it cannot compensate for a model that quietly transfers uncertainty to you.

RUN THE INTERVIEW.

Ask every firm the same seven questions. Write down the answer you actually received, not the answer you hoped you heard.

01 What can I use before I make a broad commitment? WORKING EVIDENCE: _____	02 What do I pay before I see the system working? EARLY-STAGE COST: _____
03 What is the smallest finished delivery unit? DELIVERY RHYTHM: _____	04 Where can I redirect or leave without a dispute? DECISION RIGHTS: _____
05 Who owns architecture and final quality? NAMED OWNER: _____	06 Which unknowns remain when the date is committed? DATE RISK: _____
07 What do I own if the relationship ends? OWNERSHIP: _____	

READ THE PATTERN.

- | | |
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| ☐ Working evidence appears before broad commitment. | ☐ Early cost and every exit are explicit. |
| ☐ Finished work arrives often enough to steer. | ☐ A named human owns judgment and quality. |
| ☐ The date follows risk reduction, not optimism. | ☐ Ownership survives the end of the relationship. |

If the answers stay abstract, the risk is still yours. Keep asking until the structure is visible.

Editable comparison workbook: newerasystemsllc.com/downloads/software-consulting-evaluation-matrix.xlsx