

Coaches vs. Consultants: Pros and Cons for the Early-Stage Search Team

It's an exciting time. You have permission, time, funding—something from someone or somewhere that gives a runway to start your search. You're getting a team together. A sponsor, mentor, or advisor might even be pitching in too. Next stop—fame and fortune. But you're going to need help.

People are talking. So-and-so contracted with consultant X last time, and it was great. Someone else recommends consultant Z, and someone else said that they flew in some guy from Utah every week for three months and that he was really interesting.

Stop. Bear with me, here. I'm going to employ the same methods here that I use with the teams I coach.

Consultants are solutions. They are often the most expensive solution; and often, they can be the wrong solution.

Let's step back for a moment. What outcome are you striving to achieve? While your team may currently be in the "excitement" phase, it's important to start thinking the right way, right now. What is it that you are out to do? For most early-stage teams, the answer is search. Search is execute's mom and dad. It is the space where you answer the question of "should we do it". Execute answers the question "how do we do it well?" You are in search mode, like it or not. And search mode requires a much different mindset and toolset than execute. Don't believe me? Ask Google, Amazon, Netflix, Facebook... They all have teams specifically designed to run in these vastly different roles.

So, what about that outcome? It's probably to learn as much as you can about X, to avoid a costly mistake in building X where no market exists. While that may not sound as glamorous as "inventing" the next big consumer gadget, search work is where the smartest, most dedicated people put in their time. And it's immensely rewarding work as well. Search work starts with real-world problems and the people that are experiencing them. With the signal of a problem and a customer of a solution to that problem, search work next tries to understand the outcomes of the customer, and what they are willing to do (read: behaviors) to get that outcome. Search work then designs and prototypes simple solutions to the problem to test the customer's level of motivation and desire to use that solution to drive their outcome. Then the search team iterates based on what they learn, getting a little less wrong each time, building evidence to support a bigger investment; possibly even a transition to some form of execute work.

Or, and much more often, the team learns that there isn't the opportunity around the problem that they thought there was. Now courage comes in, when you have built a case that the idea that commissioned your team isn't so great after all. But the alternative is working on a dead end. That's what failure really is. Real Success is learning what you need to learn to de-risk the future and confidently move forward: even if that means shutting down the project. Sometimes success feels like failure. But it is not.

Coaches move teams through the peaks and valleys of search work. They keep teams focused on the here and now, while also looking to the challenges and opportunities ahead. Coaches help teams move quickly by both advising and educating. They help teams become self-sufficient and ready for the next search project, while still working on the present one. Coaches are catalysts; their work speeds the team and creates opportunities where none existed before.

Circling back to the consultant decision at hand. You can hire a consultant coach for your new team. Maybe that's the right solution to your problem. But thinking in terms of outcomes, you need a coach that's flexible—in terms of time, skill set, and commitment. And disposable. Your outcome is a speedy, efficient, search sprint. If you figure out in a week or two that there's no market for what your search team is exploring, then you have to be able to pull the plug without having to worry about fulfilling a three-month contract.

Consider CoachingUP.us for your next project. We don't consider ourselves consultants. We're coaches. We're flexible across project types and concepts. We work on an hour-to-hour basis with your team. No contract, no commitment. Search work is what we do. Real Success is how we measure that work.